Spiritual learning communities: historical, systematic and practical observations[1]

Comunidade espirituais de aprendizagem: histórico, sistemática e observações práticas

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Abstract

Children and young people have the inalienable right to be part of a learning community. Nobody can learn on his/her own. Education is always a communal enterprise. In this paper the concept of the 'spiritual learning community' is developed as a contemporary answer to the socio-educational issues raised by Martin Buber and John Dewey in the 1930s. Cultural and religious diversity today stimulate education and schooling more than ever before to reconsider the narrative-communicative and spiritual dimension of every learning process. The spiritual dimension of the learning community relates to a specific *habitus*, namely of de-centration from the self and dedication to the other, and to a specific *focus*, namely on existential questions such as content of the learning process. Insights from philosophy of education and from European religious education theory and concrete

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experiences of teacher education at the universities of Dortmund (Germany) and Wien (Austria) form the horizon for this reflection.

Keywords: Learning by conversation. Learning in difference. Interreligious learning. Teacher education.

Resumo

Crianças e jovens têm o direito inalienável de ser parte de uma comunidade de aprendizagem. Ninguém pode aprender por conta própria. A educação é sempre um esforço comunal. Neste artigo, o conceito de "comunidade de aprendizagem espiritual" é desenvolvido como uma resposta contemporânea às questões socioeducacionais levantadas por Martin Buber e John Dewey nos anos 1930. Hoje, a diversidade cultural e religiosa mais do que nunca estimulam a educação e o ensino a reconsiderarem a dimensão narrativo-comunicativa e espiritual de todo processo de aprendizagem. A dimensão espiritual da comunidade de aprendizagem está relacionada a um habitus específico — a saber, a descentralização do eu e a dedicação ao outro — e a um foco específico — a saber, questões existenciais como o conteúdo do processo de aprendizagem. Insights da Filosofia da Educação e da Teoria da Educação Religiosa Europeia, além de experiências concretas da formação de professores nas universidades de Dortmund (Alemanha) e Viena (Áustria), serão o horizonte desta reflexão.

Palavras-chave: *Aprendizagem por conversação. Aprendizagem pela diferença. Aprendizagem inter-religioso. Formação de professores.*

Introduction

The authors of the latest edition of Religionsmonitor (2013) of the Bertelsmannstiftung in Germany – an international survey on the developments of values, norms and belief systems worldwide – conclude that the tension between 'individual ability to find orientation in life' and 'the necessity of social cohesion' is one of the crucial challenges for future societies worldwide. The ideological master narratives that shaped our

daily lives have evaporated. More than ever before we will need to find new meaning for ourselves and will need to cope directly with the moral and religious convictions of fellow human beings, in a context of growing complexity. We are, in a way, delivered to each other. To reinvigorate the prefix 'com' of community – in the Netherlands called the 'Nieuw Wij' (2013), literally translated as the 'New We') – we will need to focus on encounter and dialogue (BORGMAN, 2004). It goes without saying that the implications for education will be immense and complex.

The European school system with its (in many cases) public accessibility to courses of religious education provides children and young people with many opportunities for 'living and learning in difference'. It is my solid conviction that the didactical framework of 'interreligious learning', based on the newest insights in educational theory (GRÜMME, 2012) and comparative theology (VON STOSCH, 2012), will help us in better understanding, planning, executing and evaluating learning processes dealing with moral and religious diversity (ROEBBEN, 2009, 2012b) and will provide us in the long run with insights to create solid and peaceful 'New We'-societies.

But where shall we start to develop this new educational sensibility with its old roots in educational philosophy? Just do it, John Dewey would say, in the concrete encounter with others, in experiential learning and on the basis of the daily convictions of fellow human beings (GHILONI, 2011). Interreligious learning is not a sophisticated educational tool, a sort of pocket-version of the highly complex interreligious dialogue of adults, but should be a 'learning lab' for children, youngsters and their teachers. In this paper, I argue that teacher training can provide such a learning space, based on the assumption that every future teacher should first appropriate him/herself what he/she wants to transfer didactically to other people. Before theology students are able to clarify to children and young people what interreligious learning is all about and how it functions, they should first of all have had this experience themselves.

After a historical reflection on socio-educational challenges discussed by Martin Buber and John Dewey in the thirties of the 20th century, I introduce the concept of the 'spiritual learning community'

(abbreviated as SLC) and point thereby to the narrative-communicative and spiritual character of every learning process – dimensions that can be intentionally reinforced in schools, youth work and adult education. In the third part of this paper I concretize this concept in the framework of a comparative seminar on interreligious learning that took place in the teacher education department of the universities of Dortmund (Germany) and Wien (Austria).

Historical reflection: learning from Buber and Dewey

Deep in the crisis era of the thirties of the 20th century visions on a new humanity arise on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. More specifically the philosophers of education as an intellectual forefront articulate the contrast experiences of the economic and political crisis. John Dewey is holding his Terry Lectures at Yale University, published as *A Common Faith* (1934), and Martin Buber is holding his lecture Bildung und Weltanschauung for the Jewish adult education center in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1935. They are both convinced of the fact that the myth of 'equalization', embodied by the emerging Nazism in Germany, but also by traditional religions and ideologies, is doing injustice to the fundamental uniqueness and vulnerability of the human person. A new communitas is urgently needed, so both Buber and Dewey, to make head against the societal-political forces that destroy the lives of individuals and communities. This new communality can grow out of the inter-subjective encounter and out of the dialogue. From communication unity-in-diversity and truth-in-searching can spring, but also the deep awareness of the contribution of every person to this unity and truth – to this 'common faith'. Martin Buber argues that this question

> is not one of exercising 'tolerance', but of making present the roots of community and its ramifications, of so experiencing and living in the trunk (here the often questionable metaphor is rightfully used), that one also experiences, as truly as one's own, where and how the other boughs branch off and shoot up. It is not a question of a formal

apparent understanding on a minimal basis, but of an awareness from the other side of the other's real relation to the truth. What is called for is not 'neutrality' but solidarity, a living answering for one another and mutuality, living reciprocity; not effacing the boundaries between the groups, circles, and parties, but communal recognition of the common reality and communal testing of the common responsibility. Vital dissociation is the sickness of the peoples of our age, and this sickness is only apparently healed through crowding men together (BUBER, 1957, p. 102).

At the other side of the Ocean John Dewey is arguing that, if human beings could liberate themselves from the external power of submissive religions and ideologies and would focus more creatively and intrinsically on 'face to face' encounters and on the realization of their common goals, new energy could arise for the realization of a truly better world. Living and learning together are deeply interwoven in Dewey's idea. Nobody should learn on his/her own. Learning is in itself a communal enterprise. This process has a spiritual nature, according to Dewey, and could be considered as immanent mysticism:

In a distracted age, the need for such an idea is urgent. It can unify interests and energies now dispersed; it can direct action and generate the heat of emotion and the light of intelligence. Whether one gives the name 'God' to this union, operative in thought and action, is a matter for individual decision. But the function of such a working union of the ideal and the actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God in all the religions that have a spiritual content: and a clear idea of that function seems to me urgently needed at the present time (DEWEY, 1934, p. 51-52).

In what follows I weigh the 'urgency' of the visionary reflections of Buber and Dewey in the Interbellum and reconstruct their impact on education today. However, this paper has not an historical ambition (see e.g. FABER, 1962; LANSER-VAN DER VELDE; MIEDEMA, 2005), but focusses on the emerging pedagogical ideas that were and still are of the utmost relevance.

Systematic reconstruction: a definition on the test bench

Nobody should learn on him/herself. To follow the track of the secret of my existence, to understand the complexity of my identity as life project, I need the conversation with others. I learn who I am "in the presence of the other" (BOYS; 2008). In telling my story I am testing it, I am listening to the responses of others to it and then again I position myself in the encounter of these two (ROEBBEN, 2011, p. 43-60). Identity formation is always occurring in the narratio, which is fundamentally inter-subjective. Storytelling is always including the possibility of an alternative, of "it could have been otherwise", which is represented by the détour of the story of another person (physically or symbolically present, e.g. through literature). "Apprendre à se raconter, c'est aussi apprendre à se raconter autrement", so Paul Ricoeur (2004, p. 152). The community is the breeding ground for this mutual narratio, for this mutual learning process which is called identity building or 'humanization' (ROEBBEN, 2012a). In a modern educational discourse which concentrates on the output competences of individuals, this narrative-communicative process dimension of learning risks to be neglected. The awareness of the fact that learning is always communal (SCHLAG; SCHWEITZER, 2011, p. 80-81), something which happens in the powerful learning environment of the interpretative and evaluative community, is the first element of the definition of the SLC.

The second element relates seamless to the first one. Learning occurs through exposure to the other-as-oneself, to the stranger. This exposure is substantive. Without confrontation, without polishing, the diamond of education cannot sparkle. In order to act and judge in the world, in order to safeguard my contribution to the world (in the sense of Hannah Arendt), I need to expose myself to alterity and strangeness (BIESTA, 2011). This vulnerable exposure should, according to the Dutch philosopher of education Ger Biesta, not be understood instrumentally nor ontological-substantially, but existentially. It is not about allowing a little bit of exotic strangeness in order to be better prepared to found or to make up my own story better. That would mean that we

only [would] 'need' others in order to find out and make clear how we are different from them — how my identity is unique — but once this has gotten clear we wouldn't need others any more. Our relationship with others would therefore remain instrumental (BIESTA, 2011, p. 315).

Our uniqueness is precisely lying in the answer that we formulate or better that we live up to in our exposure towards other people. My uniqueness arises when I am asked to respond to the imperative of the other and to take up my response-ability. In that specific moment of exposure I experience my personal answer as a co-human being to another human being.

Uniqueness, then, ceases to be an ontological notion — it is not about what we possess or are in terms of identity — but becomes an existential notion that has to do with the ways in which we are exposed to others, are singled out by them (BIESTA, 2011, p. 316).

Education should make room for the cultivation of this fascinating interaction between universal responsibility and personal uniqueness. The Flemish philosophers of education Masschelein and Simons have been alerting us several times for the urgent necessity of a societal discourse on this fundamental relational dimension of education (MASSCHELEIN; SIMONS, 2003). In a contribution on the future of the university as a breeding ground for learning communities they argue:

Strategies of immunisation are those attempts to regulate and organise the relation with the outside in order to prevent the outside from entering one's life or one's organisation [...]. These are the strategies that prevent a com-munitas, where people are exposed to each other and to things, from coming into being. Immunisation, thus, is the ongoing fight against direct exposure or attachment. Detachment, then, is a state of immunity. What we would like to argue here is that universities could be regarded precisely as those places that embrace 'strategies of exposure' or com-munisation instead of 'strategies of im-munisation' [...] (SIMONS; MASSCHELEIN, 2009, p. 213).

This approach implies space in the SLC for conversation and dialogue, for conflict and compromise. It is not an easy one: even in new critical learning approaches such as 'education for democratic citizenship' and 'human rights education' a substantial 'concern' (e.g. a conflict or a differing meaning) do not have to be taken into account, because there is no real commitment. Friendly but empty tolerance can blind people to the fact that the other is standing in his/her own "real relation to the truth" (Martin Buber) and can differ from theirs. Conflicts can be easily ignored with 'soft' tolerance, but the 'hard' concern is therefore not necessarily solved (GEARON, 2006).

The practice of discernment, the art of the distinctio, is therefore a central element in the SLC. The Dutch theologian Kees Waaijman argues that the reason of the distinctio is not a sort of instrument to facilitate the ego. On the contrary, in the distinctio it is all about finding a common ground with others. Using arguments then means appealing to these acts and words that help to transcend the relativity of one's partial interest and perception, this means appealing to a common interest – a common faith (GEURTS, 2012, p. 25). In line with the work of Theo Sundermeier the German religious educationalists Muth and Sajak (2010, p. 29-30) talk about the distinctio as a reasonable encounter at the wall, at the distinctivum, where the two parties meet and talk about their concerns, about their differences and similarities, about what both hurts and warms them up in the process of friction. Moreover reasonability during the encounter at the wall implies that the dialogue fellows have a clue what they are talking about, in other words, that they have a common access to knowledge and share the assumption that "for a certain [...] problem there is only a limited number of forms to display the issue" (BÜTTNER, 2007, p. 134). One of the central misunderstandings of conversational learning is that content is not relevant. The opposite is true: the common content is always shaping the conversation and the conversation is always re-shaping the content.

The third element in the definition of the SLC is 'spirituality'. I consider this as a habitus, as a necessary fundamental attitude within the learning community, and as a focus, as a concentration on spirituality as content. Or the existential, spiritual experience of being an 'exposed'

human being, vulnerable and unique in his/her ability to respond, which is of central value in the SLC (ROEBBEN, 2012a). All this is based on a late modern concept of spirituality with its main feature of self-transcendence (JOAS, 2004, p. 17; ZONDERVAN, 2008, p. 157-158): although I provide my life with deeply meaningful competences and talents, I ultimately cannot be the carrying ground or foundation of my own existence. Finally I do not even understand the secret of my own life, I can only search and grasp, probing language games (Ludwig Wittgenstein), integrating and condensing my life creatively by the inspiration of art, religion, literature, etc. This is self-transcendence, or in the words of the North American theologian Sandra Schneiders (2003, p. 166): "the conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives". In the specific form of habitus, understood as 'de-centration' – putting the centre outside of oneself – and as 'dedication' – committing oneself to the otherness and strangeness of the other – spirituality is a central category in the SLC.

In the above mentioned lecture John Dewey is convinced that this spiritual attitude (or habitus) brings people together in their educational concerns. It offers a humanistic and pragmatist 'common ground' to connect religious and non-religious people in a secularized world in their search for a 'common faith' and to liberate them from false, supra-natural ideologies. Dewey says:

> In the degree in which we cease to depend upon belief in the supernatural, selection is enlightened and choice can be made in behalf of ideals whose inherent relations to conditions and consequences are understood. Were the naturalistic foundations and bearings of religion grasped, the religious element in life would emerge from the throes of the crisis in religion. Religion would then be found to have its natural place in every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization. All that is significant in human experience falls within this frame (DEWEY, 1934, p. 57).

The SLC gives human beings the chance to articulate in a denomination – and religion-transcending way the spiritual dimension of

living-together-in-diversity and to find new meaning in their common approach to the concerns of a post-secular society. Particular belief systems should not be excluded from this approach but can be rather included. They can provide it with new motivating fuel.

Exemplary concretization: interreligious learning in teacher education

Spiritual habitus: learning in hospitality

In his 'Autobiographical Fragments' Martin Buber is telling a story about an experience that moved him deeply. In the Polish school of Lemberg (today L'viv) in Galicia, the then East end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he was forced as a young Jewish boy for many years to participate silently in Catholic religious rituals. He tells:

> My school was called 'Franz Joseph's Gymnasium'. The language of instruction and of social intercourse was Polish, but the atmosphere was that, now appearing almost unhistorical to us, which prevailed or seemed to prevail among the peoples of the Austro-Hungarian empire: mutual tolerance without mutual understanding. The pupils were for the largest part Poles, in addition to which there was a small Jewish minority (the Ruthenians had their own schools). Personally the pupils got on well with one another, but the two groups as such knew almost nothing about each other. Before 8 o'clock in the morning all the pupils had to be assembled. At 8 o'clock the signal bell sounded. One of the teachers entered and mounted the professor's lecturing desk, above which on the wall rose a large crucifix. At the same moment all the pupils stood up in their benches. The teacher and the Polish students crossed themselves; he spoke the Trinity formula, and they prayed aloud together. Until one might sit down again, we Jews stood silent and unmoving, our eyes glued to the floor. I have already indicated that in our school there was no perceptible hatred of the Jews; I can hardly remember a teacher who was not tolerant or did not wish to pass as tolerant. But the obligatory daily standing in the room resounding with the strange service affected me worse than an act of intolerance could have affected me. Compulsory guests, having to participate as a thing in a sacral event in which no dram of my person could or

would take part, and this for eight long years morning after morning: that stamped itself upon the life-substance of the boy (BUBER, 1967, p. 8).

This autobiographical fragment illustrates narratively the philosophical reflection of Buber at the beginning of this article. Buber warns his readers of a soft tolerance ("mutual tolerance without mutual understanding") that equalizes people and ignores their mutual existential differences. This bringing onto line means exclusion. The freedom to single out oneself is neglected. The space to become a guest-in-freedom is 'nailed up'. As a small Jewish boy Martin Buber sees himself as a "compulsory guest". Free living and learning in the presence of the free other is denied. Indifference at the one hand or extremism at the other hand is the spontaneous outcome of such a learning situation. Buber remembers the situation sharply and will later be able to integrate this experience at a meta-level in his philosophy of inter-subjectivity.

The story is referring to the vulnerability of the SLC. Freedom is indispensable for learning through encounter. Martin Buber and his fellow Jewish classmates were forced for many years into a Catholic ritual and were not allowed to make any 'difference'. But even in situations in which one is invited as a stranger to tell one's story, there can exist equalization and even exclusion. In Dutch 'hospitality' is translated as "gastvrijheid", in German even as "Gastfreundschaft": the guest should be considered to be a truly free person, to be truly a friend. Without this prerequisite one cannot be together-in-difference, one cannot "accompany the other in strangeness" (JÄGGLE, 2009, p. 267), one cannot receive the other in "linguistic hospitality" and show him/her around in the exciting game of sameness and otherness (MOYAERT, 2011, p. 89). He/she who experiences to be a "compulsory guest", without being able to make a difference, cannot fully enjoy the offer of hospitality. There is empirical evidence for this in a school setting. Young people, who are invited to witness about their faith in another homogeneous confessional group, do feel very uncomfortable: they do not want to be formal representatives of their religion, they fear to be mobbed with their testimony and they find it painful to be identified with stereotypes of their religion (MOULIN, 2011). In this sense also Muth and Sajak (2010, p. 30-31) are rather critical to

the German confessional system of religious education in which regularly guests from other denominations are invited, so that the traditional process can be interrupted – because young people nowadays 'need' other religious voices. By other occasions I have plead (ROEBBEN, 2009, p. 145-148, 2012b) for learning processes in which the information pole (learning about) and the communication pole (learning from) – in the actual presence of others – should not get stuck in formal friendliness and an instrumentalization of the religion of the other for one's own goals, but should lead to a powerful and renewed awareness of the factual 'differences' of each participant of the conversation (learning in/through), both on a cognitive and an affective level. To know about this difference and to value this difference are the outcomes of learning-in-dialogue. In the 'exposure' through the encounter people are 'singled out' (see Biesta above) to become a self-for-another.

Spiritual focus: interreligious learning

Mutual hospitality is the key word for the habitus dimension of the SLC: one de-dicates oneself to the other in de-centration from oneself. In the interreligious dialogue this habitus is thematized as focus. In interreligious learning the inter-subjective encounter of young people belonging to different (non-)religious convictions and belief systems takes place within a conversation on life issues. Mutual information and communication are – as argued before – of great importance, but eventually the inter-subjective encounter-in-difference should be the final goal. Young people meet with each other on the street and on the playground of the school and often literally bump against each other's differences (TER AVEST, 2009). The classroom is then the place par excellence to address this issue intentionally. Many years of experience with multi-faith education in England has made specialists aware of the fact that children and young people should not only talk about religions and religious diversity in order to enhance social cohesion, but that young people should and can also learn, understand and value the particular 'grammar' of religion and world views – "the language and the wider symbolic patterns". This conversation can lead to a

heightened "self-awareness" (JACKSON, 2004, p. 169): where do I stand in this conversation and what do I have to offer the other?

The English religious educationalist Jeff Astley argues as follows:

> What they [= young people] need is a religious response to other faiths, rather than some improved rational reflection on their own position in the ultimate order of truths about reality. That is why current emphases on 'humility' and 'hospitality' often seem to hit the mark; whereas debates over the (theo)logical limits of tolerance and religious relativism leave people cold, because the debates are themselves cold (ASTLEY, 2012, p. 257).

And he continues:

> The really significant religious dialogue for the learner is not that between the religions. It is the dialogue between, on the one hand, that individual himself or herself, with his or her own worldview; and, on the other hand, the variety of beliefs, values, and spiritual and moral practices of the plural world around them, especially where it takes on a religious form. If religions are fundamentally soteriologically oriented cultures, this educational dialogue is in principle open to developing into a salvific dialogue. It is therefore bound to lay the student open to risk [...] the risk of religious embrace (ASTLEY, 2012, p. 259).

Astley is positive about the idea that this inter-spiritual learning process (focus) can lead to a new sort of inter-subjective encounter (habitus). The Belgian religious educationalist Herman Lombaerts confirms this viewpoint:

> For interreligious learning to make sense, in view of interreligious dialogue, it should forsake its merely 'functional' goals (studying and comparing the respective doctrines, exploring and adjusting rituals and prayers, etc.). Rather, it needs to cultivate an overall climate of gratuity, of disinterest, and of practicing interreligious dialogue for its own sake as a religious act (LOMBAERTS, 2007, p. 82-83).

Carried to an extreme: the focus on intentional interreligious learning, i.e., learning in the presence of the particular religious other,

can mobilize and intensify the spiritual and narrative-communicative habitus of every modern learning process to which both Buber and Dewey referred. One student in the teacher education program (see below) reported afterwards in an evaluative paper: "Although we share the same religion, it became quite clear in the conversations that we have different approaches to the theme of suffering. I am convinced that religion has been shaping us deeply in our convictions, so that we do not need to talk explicitly about religion, but that religion is showing itself (spontaneously) during the conversations". The Russian educationalist Fedor Kozyrev (2006) shares this opinion: every communication on the meaning of life is eventually of a spiritual nature.

Practicing the spiritual habitus and focus: report on a seminar

In the winter semester of 2012-2013 I held a didactical seminar on interreligious learning with students of the teacher education department of the universities of Dortmund and Wien. The aim was precisely to reflect in small SLC's of maximum 6 participants and to focus on a religious theme (theodicy or the relationship between God and human suffering) as a path to understand the spiritual habitus of the SLC. In Dortmund the group was confessionally heterogeneous (Catholics and Protestants), in Wien the group was homogeneous (only Catholics). In both groups however the participants found out that the contemporary experience of 'believing without belonging' shapes the spiritual identity of a student more deeply than his/her belonging to a specific denomination. The atmosphere in both groups was positive and constructive, because of the fact that the 'inter'-dimension of interreligious learning was constantly put into action and evaluation. Looking back to this seminar, considering the possibilities and boundaries of it and reflecting on the research potentiality of it (e.g. through action research), I can discern the seven following explorative aspects.

a) The root metaphor for this seminar was provided by Raimon Panikkar (2010): *The window*. Panikkar considers the interreligious

dialogue as a communication of human beings as story tellers of their spiritual experiences. They tell each other what they see when they look through their own window. They need to keep their window pane clear in order to tell their stories meaningfully. And they should be prepared to listen to what others are seeing or pretending to see through théir windows. In other words: they need to be sure that they can rely on each other's honest and unique 'window experience'. This metaphor had a thorough impact on the participants of the seminars.

b) Soon it became clear that diversity is not a question of belonging to one or the other religious group, but that diversity has to do with inter-personal differences and is built in in the very encounter of human beings itself. Even in confessional homogeneous groups – as far as they still actually exist today – one has to affirm internal plurality (MUTH; SAJAK, 2010, p. 30). In a society in which the master narratives have disappeared, but where also the danger of new ways of "crowding men together" (BUBER, 1957, p. 102) in market- and media-conformity is occurring, the question of the existential embodiment in small, personal stories is of vital importance. The dialogue, intentionally worked out in the SLC, can make people aware of and equip them for this new reality.

c) To concretize the difficult spiritual focus on theodicy, the novel of Joseph Roth, Hiob. Roman eines einfachen Mannes (for the English edition, see ROTH, 2002) was used as a literary condensation. The students could fully enter into the semantics and the plot of the story in order to grasp words for their own experiences and thoughts. Often a mental détour (Paul Ricoeur) through the fictive story of another in a book or a movie can be helpful and is needed to talk about vulnerable life issues at all. It helps to define the boundaries of the conversation. Like was argued before, content is indispensable for good conversational learning.

d) It was remarkable to see that confessional boundaries become indistinct when the themes in the SLC have a more universal-human bearing, such as human suffering and the existence of God question. In the confessional mixed group of Dortmund the students

often uttered that in their conversations about suffering the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants were almost not mentioned. Personal experiences and reflections crossing confessional boundaries apparently have a deeper impact than church teachings.

e) As we have argued with the boy's story of Martin Buber, learning in the presence of the other implies freedom, the hermeneutical space to think and act freely. The participants experienced in the SLC the space to explore and to test new thoughts and to invite each other in these newly explored and tested experiences of strangeness. When this hermeneutical space is guaranteed, when people allow each other to dwell "in the suburbs of language" (WITTGENSTEIN apud IPGRAVE, 2009, p. 68) – in Dortmund and Wien didactically disclosed by bibliodrama – new and free ideas can emerge. When there is no longer a need to convince or to proselytize the other, new space is opened for a self-critical, questioning and liberating approach to one's own tradition (DUMESTRE, 1995), for the way for instance in which the own faith community is dealing with the field of tension between divine and human action in the issue of suffering. Recent theological movements such as children's and youth theology understood as 'god talk' are precisely built on this concept of theological freedom (IPGRAVE, 2009; SCHLAG; SCHWEITZER, 2011).

f) Spiritual narration and communication imply not only space but also time. The participants at the SLC asked several times for more conversation opportunities. This relates to the necessity of pedagogical 'slowification' in contemporary schools (ROEBBEN, 2011, p. 104-122, 2012b, p. 1178). The many experiences of otherness of children and young people, and thus of theology students, in culture and society are, as far as I can see, not compatible with the contemporary high pace in schools. To understand otherness in a critical-productive way children and young people need more authentic learning time ("echte Lernzeit", according to MEYER, 2009, p. 39-46). This implies of course the possibility of spontaneous

learning, of new unforeseen learning paths – open for new inter-
pretation and knowledge consolidation.

g) One of the solid phantasms related to interreligious learning is that
every participant is well informed, well equipped and intention-
ally and practically behaving well – in other words that everything
goes smoothly in the discourse. This is often not the case. Many
obstacles can block the way to a fruitful dialogue. Participants can
be deliberately or unconsciously anxious about the otherness of
the other, they can deliberately or unconsciously avoid the 'leap of
faith in(to) the conversation', feeling that the learning space is not
'safe for diversity' (ROEBBEN, 2009, p. 141-143). It can also be the
case that they cannot stand the insecurity of too many questions
and too less doctrinal clarity. They can start mobbing each other
overtly or covertly, as a form of moral and religious self-defense.
It goes without saying that the SLC is then just a 'bridge too far',
which can possibly be overcome by walking further and exploring
new grass roots ways of encounter. At the other hand, it is already
quite an accomplishment that people so different from each other
can meet and talk and walk.

Conclusion

In this paper I have translated the epochal reflections of Martin
Buber and John Dewey for today, into a context of intensive and complex
experiences of moral and religious diversity. An existential approach of
learning in the way it is intentionally cultivated in the SLC, seems to be a
meaningful and helpful contribution to the realization of the pedagogical
vision of Buber and Dewey. In the context of a heightened European plu-
rality awareness – "maximum diversity on minimum space" (KUNDERA,
2007) – this project needs further practice. More research is needed as
well, namely participative research within the SLC itself (for schools, see
AFDAL, 2010; for care, see BAART; VOSMAN, 2006). But above all, more
positive experiences about living-together-in-spiritual-diversity, or at

least more accounts about existing experiences need to be documented and disseminated. In this respect it is my dearest contention that in this long term process of humanization the embeddedness in particular religious and non-religious belief systems should be taken deeply serious, in the practice and research of education and schooling.

The English researcher Julia Ipgrave is arguing that one should no longer wait, but should start positively and pro-actively with the youngest generation already today. I quote the summary of her research with young children in a school in Leicester (UK) at the end of my paper in full agreement:

> I propose that religious education in schools should include (alongside its concern to increase children's knowledge of different religious traditions) the active promotion of a theological method that takes the concept of God seriously, takes faith seriously, takes truth seriously, takes the religious perspectives of others seriously; one that forms children as theologians who are not afraid or embarrassed to express or reflect upon their own beliefs, to criticize and revise their own religious language (IPGRAVE, 2009, p. 69).

What I have learned from my teacher education students in Dortmund and Wien is the excitement of engaging in the SLC. In their encounter with children of the future they are the adults of the future. Of course they will need theological contents and didactical skills, but above all the existential habitus and focus of learning-in-and-through-encounter[2].

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