

Writing a biography based on a laundry list: Ovide Decroly (1871- 1932)

Some methodological questions and
theoretical considerations

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“It’s all about interpretation....”

- Cf. Depaepe & Simon, 2016 ► the “objective” reconstruction of the past, based on facts, seems to be an illusion
- Therefore, it is in our interest to develop multiple “ways of seeing” and to look behind the “stories” that constructed former historical narratives
- Biographic approaches constitute an excellent opportunity for this, as subjects are supposed to possess relative stable characteristics that determine their live stories
- And maybe – see further – a collective of researchers (that complement each other) is best placed to do so!

However, that doesn't hinder that facts exist...
aging e.g.

- Thus, starting from chronology is not a superfluous luxury...; what determines life at large is the interaction with the environment and the concrete experiences people undergo when confronted with specific historical circumstances (critical incidents not excluded)
- In order to dispel [or to deconstruct] the “myths” about celebrities e.g. it is essential to go back as much as possible to the real facts... for a reliable biography



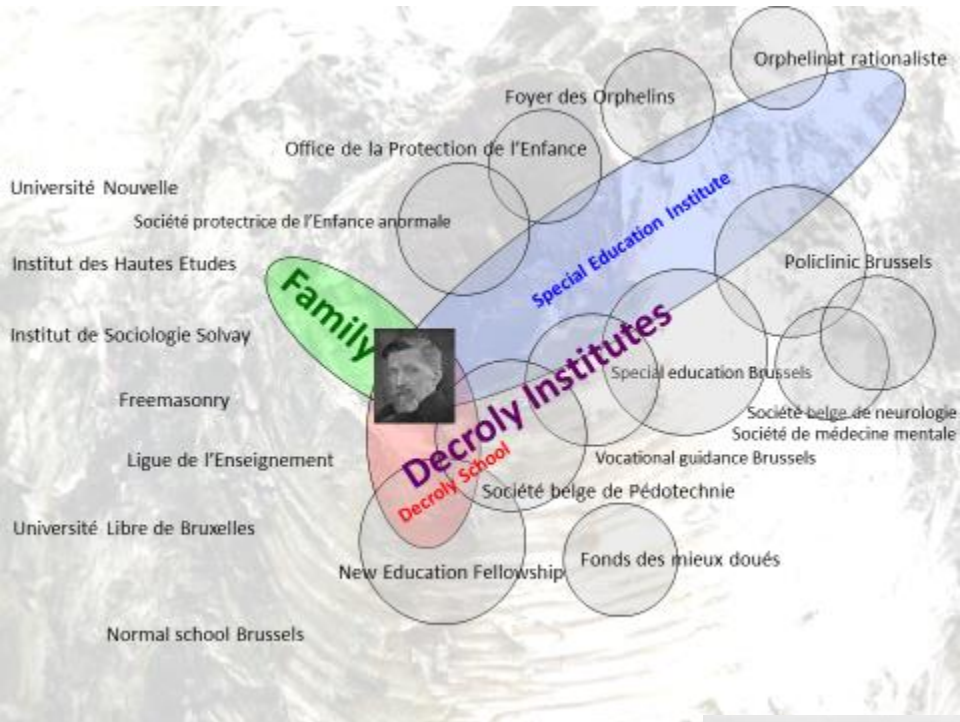
The *laundry list* as a starting point

- Compiling a “laundry list” ► important tool: A type of chronological, a posteriori agenda... which allows the confrontation of hagiographic “myths” with everyday realities... In the case of the famous Belgian educational reformer Ovide Decroly:
- Where had he actually been? To which meetings, which conferences? What was he actually concerned with? And what was the input from his environment in all this? To what extent did he still have time to conduct the research, the practical work, and the writing of papers, articles and books that were ascribed to him?
- Long and time consuming archival work: in Brussels, Paris, Madrid, The Hague, Rotterdam, London, Geneva, etc.

One page from Decroly's laundry list (1100 items) as example

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Rec	Datum	(35) Beknopte omschrijving	(36) Uitvoerige omschrijving	(42) Commentaar	(44) Referentie	
99	430	12/03/1928	OD woont vergadering van Comité des Parents Ecole Decroly bij			CentreD, Procès-verbaux ASBL Ecole Decroly, 1922-1962	
00	431	12/03/1928	OD woont vergadering van Comité des Parents Ecole Decroly bij			CentreD, Procès-verbaux ASBL Ecole Decroly, 1922-1962	
01		31/03/1928	zitting SMMB, OD aanwezig	tussenkomst OD		JDN et de Psychiatrie, XXVIII, 5 (mei 1928) 337	
02	415	2/04/1928-5/04/1928	Conférence internationale: le bilinguisme et l'éducation, Luxemburg	bijdrage van Decroly		zie congressen-databank	
03	420	6/04/1928	causerie OD op Semaine pédagogique provinciale normaalschool fröbel Hainaut: l'enfant de 0 à 3 ans	vrijdag; semaine van 2-7 april		CentreD, Lettres I, folder programma	
04		6-7/04/1928	oprichting Commission internationale pour le matériel didactique te Brussel, OD lid, de stichtingsvergadering gebeurt onder voorzitterschap van Paul Otlet. Doel: productie en verspreiding van geselecteerd didactisch materiaal - type-collecties en prenten voor intuïtief onderwijs, indien mogelijk individueel en zelfopvoedend	J.E. Verheyen is secretaris, maakten verder deel uit van de Commission: Otlet, A. Ferrière (Genève), P. Geddes (Montpellier), Mej. A. Oderfeld en mevrouw Radlinska (Warschau), mevrouw Reynier (Parijs), Katzaref (Sofia), mevrouw Nemes (Budapest), Rugg (New York), Salvoni (Como).	is een wens geuit op het Congrès Int Education Nouvelle Locarno (3-15 aug 1927), maar ook reeds vroeger gewenst (zie artikel Otlet en Pour l'Ère nouvelle, 21 (juli 1926)	Verslag algemene vergadering, 25 juli 1928, Mundaneum PO33UAI, Fédération mondiale des éducateurs	
05	419	23/04/1928	OD woont vergadering van Comité des Parents Ecole Decroly bij			CentreD, Procès-verbaux ASBL Ecole Decroly, 1922-1962	
06		28/04/1928	zitting SMMB, OD aanwezig	buitengewone vergadering		JDN et de Psychiatrie XXVII, 5 (mei 1928) 338	
07		28/04/1928	vergadering SNB, OD aanwezig	tussenkomst OD		JDN et de Psychiatrie, XXVIII, 6 (juni 1928) 408-409	
08	418	4/05/1928	vraag dat OD een tekstje schrijft voor conferentie aan normaalsch in Porto over methode Decroly, orthofonie, globalisatie en auditief gehandicapten	dankt OD voor onthaal in Brussel; gebruikt methode in Portugal; heeft tijdschrift mede gesticht "L'école primaire" en serie artikels gepubliceerd over de methode		CentreD, Correspondants étrangers II, José da Cruz Filipe aan OD, Lissabon	
09		6/05/1928	les cours normal d'enseignement spécial, 9-10u30, zondag	Nyns herinnert er OD aan dat hij zondag les heeft		CentreD, map "Tests Decroly", 1 mei 1928, Nyns aan OD	
		24/05/1928	zitting Conseil d'administration Foyer des Orphelins, OD zit voor; vergadering eindigt 20u30			Archief Foyer, Le "Foyer des Orphelins". Société coopérative pour la création de homes familiaux. Conseil d'administration. Registre	

Prototype of a “modern” researcher?



1928

- Professor Université Libre Bruxelles , normal school Brussels, school for special education
- President Executive Board Foyer des Orphelins
- Comité des Parents Ecole Decroly (Instituts Decroly)
- Comité de sélection du Fonds des Mieux doués (gifted pupils)
- President Société belge de Pédotechnie
- Head policlinic Brussels
- Conferences, lectures,.... in Belgium and abroad
- Inspector Ministry of Justice
- School doctor special education Brussels
- Head department vocational guidance Brussels
- Member several medical societies, Ligue de l'enseignement, etc...; freemason (conferences)
- Editor, member of the editorial board several journals, ...Etc...



Activities of Decroly

- Monday:** Ermitage school
- Wednesday:** Medical practice
- Thursday:** Foyer des orphelins (orphanage)
- Saturday:** Société de médecine mentale, Société de neurologie
- Sunday morning:** teaching

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And his biographers...

- How can three people write a biography?
- And what about the “biographic illusion” (Bourdieu, 2005)?
- What is the attraction of Decroly? How does it relate to former research?
- Long history of collaborative work between us.... Many collective publications in related fields (New Education, History of Ed. Sciences, Historiography, theory and methodology... but also on less important figures like Verheyen, who played an important role as former biographer and follower of Decroly...)



Theoretical backgrounds?

- Already partly published in Latvian, in Riga, 2015 (thanks to Iveta Kestere)
- Cf. Jan Romein: the ideal methodology for biography does not exist – “*biography has no method, but is a method*” (quoted in Renders, 2013)
- Cf. the appropriation of W. Maugham’s famous quote of the novel: “there are three basic rules for writing a biography. Unfortunately nobody knows what they are...”
- Cf. our constant plea to combine multiple story lines, to contextualise, to put in a broader perspective, and to avoid blind spots
- E.g. financial support (of research and participation at the international networks)?

The gender issue as example...



Guisset: *“his work was for me like a child I had brought up with him; for us both it was what most occupied our thoughts ...*

Maintaining his memory has always been my principal thought, the goal I pursue, and my reason for living”

- An iconic picture: a *reading* Decroly and a *writing* Agnès Guisset
- Doing research at the time was gender biased
- Role of Mme Decroly?
- Copying, Correcting, Translating, Writing Texts (?), Observing children and... Providing the money for *his* research!!
- By extension – the same questions for his whole environment, mainly women (as “practical” educators)?
- Admiration of the (male) Master
- Love affair with Marie-Louise Wauthier...
- Ethical questions about “personal” life?



Methodological pitfalls? Booming biographies...

- The “biographical turn” ... cf., e.g., Caine, 2010, 1: *“biographical approach is an addition to the understanding of general developments by providing a way of accessing subjective understanding and experience”*
- The feminist approach: cf., e.g., Burr Margadant, ed., 2000: *“feminist scholars shifted their focus of analysis from women as a biologically identifiable group to the way cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity, i.e. gender, work in different settings to situate females in relation to social power”*...
- ► “Putting women in their place”, e.g. Maddrell, 2009

New Emphases?

- Following the same Burr Margadant, ed., 2000: *“For new biographers, given the self-consciousness of their role as creators of the history that they write, the narrative strategy designed to project a unified persona has become nearly as suspect as the claims to a ‘definite’ biography. **The new biography claims to be neither monocular nor monolithic**”*
- Hence, “our” constant qualification of so-called “turns” in history [of education]: linguistic turn, pictorial turn [and our presumed *‘iconophobia’* (!)], turn to things, animal turn, emotional turn, etc...

Biography in respect to history of education

- Traditional outlook, small distance between biography and hagiography...
- Moreover: the existence of “*une panne biographique*” (Savoie, 2013)?
- Concerning Decroly ► Wagnon, 2013; Blichmann, 2014 – but what is “new” in these biographies? ► certainly not in opposition with the “comfortable” belief of the Decrolyens (but rather continuing the myth, the Decroly cult and the afterlife via the Decroly-school)



Questions, considerations and challenges for a biography of Decroly

- Overwhelming source material: Decroly wrote everywhere... on everything (scarce information about money)
- Overwhelming functions, responsibilities, initiatives, networks, societies, etc...
- Overwhelming amount of papers, conferences, articles, books, but no general synthesis as Opus Magnus
- An effective “medical gaze” as a continuity through his works (cf. his “expertise”, which is, however, not very much recognised in educational circles...)
- A “modern moi”? Belonging to the “scientific personae”? Cultural identity between individual biography and social institutions?

Hence, the constant need to interpret and to contextualise, to (de)mythologise and to (de)psychologise?

- Aiming at a full story rather than an impressionistic image
- Nevertheless, attention to “critical incidents”, cf., e.g., the “annus horribilis” of 1930 ► The hardworking and humble Decroly became “sick”, “burn out”? + what were the reactions and behavior of his near environment - those we have labelled as “*les decrolyens*”...?
- And how much can we “psychologize”? Should we try to put rationality or coherence in his personality? But does the unity of a person exist?
- And what about his love stories with Marie-Louise Wauthier and possible other “*collaboratrices*” ?
- And where do we find evidence for all his emotions?

Expected results

- We hope to contribute to a more detached historiography of education, and particularly to a history of education biography with less “euphoric enthusiasm” as it was written before...
- An antidote for “hagiography” is – as we already have explained – cherishing the diversity that surrounds us: diversity of methods, diversity of questions, diversity of sources, diversity of interpretations, diversity of paradigms (which is probably more easy by “**teamwork**” – too rare in history and history of education...)
- Finally, as biographers we are also trying to engage in dialogue with the very “human” and “tolerant” biographical subject that we are describing – convinced that humanity and tolerance are characteristics that we will need more than ever in the near future..

A contextualised Decroly ► as a modern “self”?

**Biographic enigma survives
biographic writing**



Adapation of
Kazimir Malevich's
*Three Female
Figures*, 1928-1930