LABYRINTH Vol. 25, No. 1, Autumn 2023

THOUGHTFUL LABOR. SIMONE WEIL ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Anouk Zuurmond (Amsterdam)

Abstract

The work of Simone Weil is increasingly important in the field of philosophy of education, however, her ideas on schooling have been largely understood from her later, religiously inspired works. This paper argues that this approach does not do justice to the fact that Weil's thinking about education is already present in her earlier works and that her educational ideas were profoundly inspired by her experience as a factory worker. One of the key insights Weil gained whilst working in a factory was the importance of what she refers to as "thoughtful labor". This paper addresses this concept by engaging with the earlier work of Weil on educational philosophy. Furthermore, these ideas are juxtaposed with a German tradition in pedagogical thinking, emerging around the same time, on the notion of Berufsbildung*, which indicates a combination of professional, personal and societal formation in vocational training. I argue that Weil shares with this tradition the crucial idea that work can have an educational value, and that it should be integrated into the educational system. However, the tradition of* Berufsbildung *has been critiqued for its strong tendency to consolidate existing power structures; I suggest that this critique is still valid on current discourses on general formation and* Bildung *in vocational education. In the final part of this article, I argue that on this point the work of Simone Weil differs from the notion of* Berufsbildung*, as she stands in a tradition of educational thinkers who remind us of the potential revolutionary character of education.*

Keywords: Simone Weil, Georg Kerschensteiner, *Berufsbildung*, vocational education

> Not only should man know what he is making, but if possible he should see how it is used – see how nature is changed by him. Every man's work should be an *object of contemplation* for him.
> (Simone Weil, *Factory Journal*)

In her work *Philosophia. The Thought of Rosa Luxemburg, Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt*, Andrea Nye suggests that the connection between these three female philosophers is that

> [t]he questions they address are historical, practical, and theoretical: how, in the last years of the twentieth century, are we to move on into the future from a past in which there has been the collapse of progressive social theory and the evil of the Holocaust? […] How, if science is increasingly inaccessible to common understanding, is science to bring about human freedom? (Nye 1994, xix)

Making a move into the future from the past was to Hannah Arendt a question that was necessarily *educational*. One of the key texts in the field of philosophy of education is Arendt's "The Crisis of Education", published in 1958 and later reprinted in *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought*, in which she addresses the issue of how to move from a troubling past into a future. Arendt's thoughts might be summarized by characterizing her as a 'conservative revolutionary'. She observes that "conservatism, in the sense of conservation, is the essence of educational activity" (Arendt 1961, 192). Teachers have a responsibility to introduce children into the world of human affairs of the past and present – and that is a form of conservation. In other words: the world of human affairs is outside and school forms a path towards this domain of mature people. Thus, according to Arendt, school should be a pre-political realm and certainly not the world of political affairs, where teachers involve students in political causes. Arendt had observed personally the dangers of politicizing schools: the tendency of tyrannical movements to indoctrinate young children via the educational system occurred in the country that she managed to escape – Germany during the rise of fascism. And it is exactly because Arendt is not only conservative but also a revolutionary, that she argues how "we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look" (Arendt 1961, 192). It is the possibility of new beginnings and the unpredictability of human action, that need to be protected in the educational praxis. When the older generation starts to prescribe to a younger generation how to create a new beginning, we deny them the chance to take up this task themselves.

To this day "The Crisis of Education" is an inspiration for many educational thinkers, who reflect on the role of schools in society and the educational responsibilities of teachers. With Arendt, one can argue that schools need to be a separate sphere in society. The Flemish philosophers of education Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, for example, stated in their article "The Hatred of Public Schooling: The School as the Mark of Democracy" that,

> [t]he school is not primarily the space/time where knowledge is passed on in view of the preparation for adult occupations. It is rather a space/time that is outside the necessities of labour or work. It (literally) places labour at a distance. (Masschelein and Simons 2010, 673)

A typical feature of the separateness of the school is "suspension", as these authors argue: "Economic, social, cultural, political or private time is suspended, as are the tasks and roles connected to specific places" (675). The Arendtian notions of conservation and protecting the revolutionary potential of a new generation, together with the notion of suspension, offer a stark warning for the merging of the domains of education with politics, economics, and the world of labor.

However: how are we to understand the separateness of school for institutes of vocational training? In the Netherlands, 40% of students choose vocational education, and they can do so at the age of sixteen. Research in the Netherlands indicates a merging of the private and public sector into so-called "ecosystems" in which private (market-based) and public (educational) aspects are closely interwoven, especially in vocational education (Waslander 2021). One may wonder if these ecosystems are not an infringement upon the educational space as Arendt envisioned. On the other hand, we cannot deny that the domain of labor is never far away in vocational education: students do their traineeships on site, and the ways in which students are trained and assessed in vocational institutes are often the result of a cooperation with future employers.

This raises the question whether it is at all possible for schools in vocational training to retain a form of suspension. Can we imagine a co-operation between education and the world of labor without the field of education being overruled by the field of economics? Or to put it more bluntly: are we able to prevent that vocational education becomes a mere training to create an efficient workforce? To grapple with these questions, I will use the work of Simone Weil, as I understand her thinking about education as a possible answer to this dilemma.

The work of Simone Weil is increasingly important in the field of philosophy of education – and especially her notion of 'attention' has garnered interest from educational thinkers. However, this concept has been largely understood from her later, religiously inspired works, namely *Gravity & Grace* and *Waiting for God*. This paper argues that this approach does not do justice to the fact that Weil's thinking about 'attention' and education is already present in her earlier

works, which she wrote whilst being a teacher herself and from a Marxist perspective – albeit quite an unorthodox one. During her twenties, Weil desperately wanted to experience the world outside her study-room: as a resistance fighter, but also, somewhat less glamorously, as a factory worker. At a time when there was a flood of publications on oppression, revolution and the condition of the working class by intellectuals who had never set foot in a factory themselves, she actually took the step to link abstract theory to everyday practice by becoming a factory worker herself. However, her writings from these formative years are less known. In the introduction to the volume *Formative Writings,* with a collection of early works from Weil, it is stated that the translations and publications in English of these early writings were often fragmentary, resulting in the fact that "the *other* Weils, the political activist and the philosopher/teacher, never caught up in the public mind with the religious Weil" (Tuck McFarland and Van Ness 1987, 5). Yet, I argue that her educational ideas were profoundly inspired by her experience as a factory worker. Even though her hopes for a large-scale revolution had diminished, Weil continued to invest time and effort in educating factory workers and farm laborers, convinced as she was that at least the field of labor might be revolutionized when a workforce is provided with the opportunity to learn how to reason, read literature and engage in science.

First, I will explore Simone Weil's thoughts on labor and education, then contextualize her ideas in a larger discourse on reforming vocational education in the early 20th century and the dilemma of retaining a separate sphere for education. Contrasting the work of Weil with the classic notion of *Berufsbildung*, I propose, in the final section of this article, to re-position Weil in the field of philosophy of education.

1. Simone Weil on Thoughtful Labor

In 1934, Simone Weil's great dream comes true: her request for a leave from her comfortable teaching job for personal study is granted and she starts working at different factories in Paris. She stood on the assembly line, operated heavy and dangerous machinery and worked in front of open fire. This experience determines her life and philosophical understanding of labor. It is in the factory that Weil is able to develop her ideas on the importance of attention and the indispensability of education for workers.

Weil specifically hoped to learn how the mechanisms of oppression work in real life, as she had been reflecting on this issue from a philosophical perspective. A profound societal enigma lies at the heart of her research: "The submission of the greater number to the smaller – that fundamental characteristic of nearly every form of social organization – still continues to astonish all who reflect a little" (Weil 2023b). During her year as an unskilled worker, she kept a "factory journal", recording how machines work, how workers interact with each other, and what it means to be paid for piecework. The notes reveal how Weil suffered from the mind-numbing and physically exhausting work – especially in a Taylorized setting, in which workers, in the words of Weil, "cannot determine for themselves the procedures and rhythms of their work" (in: Blum and Seidler 2010, 36). Most machines thus have a "rate": the minimum number of items that must be produced per day by the worker on that machine. Weil loses her job several times, for not being able to reach that rate, for getting sick, or for accidentally hurting herself. The deadly fatigue, the uncertainty of existence and the yoke of the clock are a common thread in her factory notes. In a key scene Weil describes how, during a bus ride home, she is suddenly overcome by the thought:

> How is it that I, a slave, can get on this bus and ride on it for my 12 sous just like anyone else? What an extraordinary favor! If someone brutally ordered me to get off, telling me that such comfortable forms of transportation are not for me, that I have to go on foot, I think that would seem completely natural to me. Slavery has made me entirely lose the feeling of having any rights. (Weil 1987, 211)

At that moment she realizes that she completely has lost her self-esteem, that the profound tragedy of factory work has made her a "slave": "the work is too mechanical to offer material for thought, and [it] nevertheless forbids all other thoughts" (Weil 2023a). Thoughtlessly and routinely, workers in Taylorized workplaces are only concerned with completing their task as quickly as possible to reach their "rate".

An important moment in her reflections on education occurs when she finds herself for once *not* being bored during her factory work: that day she works on a machine that jams on a regular basis. During her shift she tries to figure out the cause of this jamming and studies possible solutions. She suddenly has the privilege of using her mind, and this intellectual challenge is the reason that her work suddenly becomes a lot less tedious. That is exactly what work should be all about, she realizes: doing something with attention, that is, acting thoughtfully.

By the use of attention, one can overcome the division of intellectual and manual labor. The impossibility for many workers of acting thoughtfully during labor is a fundamental insight Weil gained in the factories. As Françoise Meltzer summarizes:

> Over and over again, the journal she kept during her factory work attests to her crushing fatigue and inability to think. And yet attention for Weil is only possible through work. The paradox is for her one of the profound scandals of high capitalism. (Meltzer 2001, 614)

Weil's view on the division of manual and intellectual labor is grounded in her more profound philosophical critique of Descartes's body – mind dichotomy, an idea that is in itself not 'clear and distinct', remarked Weil. We are all thinking bodies, that make sense of the world by interacting. It is the immense influence of exactly this Cartesian dichotomy that caused the division of intellectual and manual labor, as Andrea Nye described: "Descartes's certain knowledge of mathematical physics laid the groundwork for the separation of theoretical knowledge from manual labor, and consequently for the inaccessibility of science to common understanding" (Nye 1994, 83).

Weil's thoughts would result in her long essay "Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression", written in her year of factory-work 1934. Unlike Marxists at the time, Weil had fundamental doubts about the possibility of a proletarian revolution to escape the conditions of social oppression. According to Weil, Marx was wrong to view oppression as part of a class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, which would culminate in revolution. Her criticism is twofold. First, she had experienced for herself what mind-numbing factory work does to people: if you are unable to think at work, it leads to a feeling of inferiority. A workers' revolution is therefore impossible: oppression of workers only leads to a permanent feeling of subjugation and exhaustion, not to revolt – and despite her fatigue, Weil does not lose her sense of humor when she notices in her factory journal that she only rebelled on Sundays (Weil 1987).

Her second criticism demonstrates Weil's uncanny foresight. She argued that Marx had misunderstood the modern production process, because the power structures of labor will continue to exist even in classless societies. This means that workers, whether they live in a communist or a capitalist system, will always be confronted with people who monitor their work and thus exercise power over them. In other words, Weil predicted the rise of managers, since more and more areas of

expertise are involved separately in the same production process: the worker who is trained to operate one machine (without technical knowledge of that machine), a technician who manages a machine (without insight in the scientific foundations on which the operation of the machine is based) and a scientist who designed the machine (without knowledge of the experiences of the worker who operates it). She pointed out that "the conditions of all privilege, and consequently all oppression, is the existence of a corpus of knowledge essentially closed to the working masses" (Weil 2001, 33). As Christopher Grey summarizes: "For Weil, oppression was inherent within managerial practice irrespective of the intentions behind its deployment and the socio-economic formation within which it was deployed"(Grey 1996, 600).

Instead of waiting for a proletarian revolution, we should thus improve working conditions. Workers must have knowledge of the technical aspects of the machine as well as the scientific basis of the design of the machine they operate. The connection between thinking and acting, in other words, needs to be restored. The key to understanding oppression, but also in countering these mechanisms, thus lies in education.

2. Weil's educational ideas

Simone Weil's striving towards 'thoughtful labor' needs educational and social reforms, so that any student will see and experience science 'at work' in places of labor, and any laborer will be offered the opportunity of reading and learning about working conditions and technology. Weil's pursuit of thoughtful labor would have major implications, especially for vocational education. Weil was convinced that contemporary university education for the elite on the one hand and vocational training with a diluted dose of culture on the other were both clearly inadequate, as Nye (1994, 89) puts it.

A first major reform would be that everyone should be able to go to school until the age of eighteen, even those who would eventually do more practical than theoretical work (Pétrement 1976). After all, Weil was convinced that more knowledge contributes to improving the lot of workers. She believed that everyone can learn to think independently by engaging in scientific knowledge or reading literary texts. In the collected essays *The Need for Roots*, she explains:

> On the whole, and saving exceptions, second-class works and below are most suitable for the élite, and absolutely first-class works most suitable for the people. For example, what an intensity of understanding could spring up from contact between the people and Greek poetry, the almost unique theme of which is misfortune! Only, one would have to know how to translate and present it. A workman, for instance, who bears the anguish of unemployment deep in the very marrow of his bones, would understand the feelings of Philoctetus when his bow is taken away from him, and the despair with which he stares at his powerless hands. (Weil 2002b, 67)

This means, secondly, that the curriculum needs to be completely restructured. In a nutshell: school must become *theoretically* more demanding and, at the same time, much more *concrete*. Science must become accessible and more practical in vocational education. Everyone is capable of understanding fundamental scientific and mathematical insights, as long as they are clearly linked to concrete practical situations. A Weilian "pedagogy of science", as Nye explains, understands science as ways of acting in the world, knowledge that is validated on the factory floor (Nye 1994, 88–90). Scientists should not automatically be trusted, argued Weil, because science itself is not neutral – it can be utilized or ordered for specific causes (Weil 2001). The fact that Frederick Taylor's design for factory processes was deemed "a scientific method" was just one example of that (Blum and Seidler 2010). Workers need to understand this non-neutrality, besides the scientific fundamentals, so that they can form their own thoughts instead of following scientists and intellectuals. In order to bring practice and theory together as closely as possible, students must be trained partly in the factory or on the land, and partly in the schools (Weil 2002b). In education, *everyone* should also gain access to "academic language", which is currently only accessible to people in higher education. Academic language is a means of subjugation, Weil believed, and emancipating workers would mean demystifying scientific language that seems to be aimed primarily at excluding people (Nye 1994).

And third, education should be focused on one overarching goal: training attention. Weil argues that attention formation is a practice that should be trained by everyone. Weil understands attention as a completely passive activity; it is something that happens to you, for which you just have to wait in peace. As an example, Weil describes a student struggling with a writing assignment. Searching for the right word, this student must carefully cross out all words that do not fit; she then has to wait with an open attitude for the moment that the right word suddenly occurs to her. Even when a student has no aptitude for a subject, struggling with a problem

can often be a good attention exercise. Learning to deal with the resistance of a difficult text or complex practical task on a work floor, without having to complete it within a certain time frame or being evaluated as part of an assessment procedure, is the most important thing you can do for young people, argues Weil (Weil 2009).

Ultimately, this way of providing education – aimed at attention, broad training and at the same time preparing for a profession through the practical application of science and the combination of work and learning – will create a well-educated class of workers, who no longer form the proletariat, but a group of professionals. They are employees who can address working conditions, who are no longer intimidated by scientists and technicians and who, preferably in small collectives, can oversee the entire work process. Instead of being mere cogs in a machine, workers in a factory can then also be involved in product research and design processes. Weil assumed that bureaucrats and managers would eventually be redundant, once work had become "thoughtful" again.

3. *Berufsbildung*

Around the same time, during the 1920's, vocational education was increasingly discussed by other thinkers as well, especially in Germany by the educational philosophers Georg Kerschensteiner (1854-1932) and Eduard Spranger (1882-1963)(Zuurmond et al. 2023). Their ideas are developed as an improvement of the so-called 'continuation schools' or *Fortbildungsschulen*: institutions to fill in the gap between the *Volksschule*, which working-class youths left at the age of 14, and the time of marriage or military service (Kuhlee, Steib, and Winch 2022). These types of schools were not primarily interested in the qualification of young people, but had more of a sociopolitical task: supervising young people by the state (Gonon 2022). Re-thinking these institutions and turning them into '*Berufsschule*' – aimed at combining vocational and citizenship education – was one of the outcomes of the work of Kerschensteiner and Spranger.

Kerschensteiner's ideas formed an important impetus for educational reforms in Germany. He asserted that education is concerned with the moral, intellectual and technical formation of students, and this should be accomplished via vocational training. As Kerschensteiner states: "True education is always attained through work: it only acquires its strength from serious, intensive, practical, productive activity. The craftsman, the farmer, the artist, the scholar all reach true human greatness through independent work at definite tasks" (in Simons 1966, 52). In

other words: work can be educative, when it combines manual activities with mental effort. Vocational settings allow students to reflect on moral dilemmas, to learn about the history of the craft, and to understand current legal aspects connected to this profession. Geoffrey Hinchliffe explains that the main educational aim Kerschensteiner envisioned, was to create future citizens that are both active members of a community *and* capable of independent thinking:

> So although the aims of education do indeed involve the development of individuals who can be of service to the state, this service is best given by individuals who are knowledgeable and can think for themselves, who are unafraid of failure and setbacks and have the self-confidence to speak out when needed. (Hinchliffe 2022, 2)

Dina Kulhlee e.a. (2022) explain how these ideas on the educative value of work were crucial in abolishing the traditional separation between general or theoretical education and vocational education. Together with Eduard Spranger, Kerscheinsteiner formulated the classical German vocational education theory (*klassische Berufsbildungstheorie*), which brought professional training back into the field of education. The notion of *Berufsbildung* ('vocational *Bildung*') diverges from the original understanding of *Bildung*, famously formulated by Von Humboldt, which can be briefly characterized as the cultivation of the individual by studying works of art from the classical Antiquity. This "classical prejudice" was difficult to tie up with vocational training (Sanderse 2021). *Berufsbildung* opens up the idea that the development of the individual can also take place through professional training, leaning on a less individualistic and classical notion of personal cultivation, as Hinchliffe concludes:

> It is clear that the collective ruminations of Kerschensteiner, Spranger and Fischer amount to a repudiation of this particular version of *Bildung* [as understood by Von Humboldt, AZ] since what I have termed an 'occupational democracy' is premised on the idea that personal self-development best occurs through being part of an occupational pursuit and tradition. The idea is that occupations, viewed as a combination of technical skills, theoretical knowledge and social understanding can provide the environment for *Bildung* to develop. (Hinchliffe 2022, 8–9)

The ideas of Kerschensteiner are very similar to those of his highly influential contemporary, the educational philosopher John Dewey (Knoll 2017; Zuurmond et al. 2023). Indeed, on his travels to the United States, Kerschensteiner "was surprised to see how similar some of Dewey's ideas were to his own" (Simons 1966, 82). Dewey also stated that the educational process should be grounded on acting,

and not on abstract knowledge communicated to pupils, as was often the case in schools: "Only in education, never in the life of farmer, sailor, merchant, physician, or laboratory experimenter, does knowledge mean primarily a store of information aloof from doing" (Dewey 1966, 185).

Eduard Spranger developed Kerschensteiner's idea of *Berufsbildung* further. *Bildung* can be embedded in a vocation, "even if the modern factory has not yet integrated an educational spirit" (Gonon 2022, 6). In his classic essay "The educational task of the German vocational school" from 1958, Spranger grounds his ideas on vocational education within an "expected new industrial revolution", namely the emerging automation of the work floor:

> Up until now, this switching on and adjusting the machine was relatively easy, even monotonous. With automation, this work with the switches will probably require a great deal more insight into the machine-driven process and a great deal more presence of mind. The type of human being who will be required for this work will have to be at an intellectually higher level than the teams of operators up until this point. (Spranger 2022, 12)

In order for students in vocational education to assume moral responsibility, schools must become more like workshops (Gonon 2022). The proposals by Spranger and Kerschensteiner led to so-called 'activity schools', where general subjects no longer dominated the curriculum; instead, vocational training formed the basis for education – history, science and math could be tied to vocational-specific issues and problems for students to discuss and reflect upon.

Despite the influence of Kerschensteiner and Spranger on the reformation of vocational education in Germany, their importance waned in post-war Germany. As indicated above, their writings need to be contextualized within times of societal unrest and the emergence of social democratic movements, that is why the main point of critique was their orientation on stabilizing the system and maintaining the existing class order – which can be gathered, for instance, from the previously mentioned essay by Spranger on the educational task of the vocational school:

> The young person must gradually be led to the awareness that there is already latently present within himself his commitment to the state, and, yes, commitment by the state. This hidden acquiescence to the state must be brought to life. (Spranger 2022, 6)

Processes of nation-building and a fight against socialism and individual liberalism were thus the societal challenges that education faced (Gonon 2022;

Kuhlee, Steib, and Winch 2022). With this context in mind, some more recent educational thinkers have doubts whether "Kerschensteiner's approach is a vocational pedagogical approach at all, or rather whether it is deceptive in that apparently vocational principles are in fact being used instrumentally for a restorative state–political education" (Sloane 2022, 5). Another important point of critique was the unrealistic depiction of work in these theories on vocational *Bildung*, which is removed from the everyday realities of labor in a Taylorist setting (Sloane 2022); Kerschensteiner and Spranger were criticized for their perceived "ideological overemphasis on the occupation (*Beruf*), a certain partisanship of the crafts over industry, and a romanticisation of craft vocational education and the neglect of industrial vocational education" (Kuhlee, Steib, and Winch 2022, 10).

With these German developments in philosophical reflections on vocational education in mind, we can position Weil's thinking on education in a larger context, and also address the critique that the notion of *Berufsbildung* might have functioned as a cover to serve the interests of the ruling class.

4. Weil and *Berufsbildung*

If we relate the thoughts of Simone Weil on vocational education to the thoughts of her contemporaries in Germany on *Berufsbildung*, one can observe how all of them show a discontent with the current state of affairs in vocational training – and their shared efforts to address this issue by aiming to overcome the opposition between theoretical and practical education, or general formation and professional training; a binary that still resonates to this day. One element in particular, on which I will focus in this comparison, is the crucial resemblance in the idea that work can have an *educational* value, and that it should be integrated into school during vocational training. This can take shape by interrelating topics such as history, law or literature to the profession of students, by turning schools into workshops where experts from the field provide instructions (the so-called activity schools from Kerschensteiner and Spranger), but also by sending students for traineeships outside schools, as Weil proposed. Spranger and Weil both show an awareness of the role of machines in the profession, and how important this is for the role of workers: Weil understands the machines on the work floor of the 1930's industrial settings as a foreshadowing of managerialism, Spranger in the fifties as the start of the age of automation. Moral and intellectual development should not be the result of courses in ethics or science – moral dilemmas emerge from situations in the workplace (as Kerschensteiner and

Spranger emphasize) and scientific insight results from seeing science in the practice of, for example, a certain industrial setting, as Weil claims. Education through vocational training should provide an opportunity for students to train their attention in a Weilian sense, or to think independently according to the German tradition.

All of them thus seek to overcome the opposition between general and vocational education – however, there are also striking differences between Simone Weil's ideas on vocational education and *Berufsbildung*. One can argue, for example, that Weil leans far more on the traditional notion of *Bildung* by Von Humboldt, compared to Kerschensteiner and Spranger, in her plea for the importance of reading classical tragedies on any educational level – but especially with workers. There are many other aspects in Weil's and the German tradition of thinking about vocational education that can be compared and contrasted, but I will focus here on one key issue and that is the perceived consolidating nature of the notion of *Berufsbildung* – as already suggested in the critiques in the previous section. Societal unrest and the emergence of social democratic movements formed the background of the writings of Kerschensteiner and Spranger and civic education was interpreted as a means of countering these tendencies on behalf of the existing state order. *Berufsbildung* had a system-stabilizing function (Sloane 2022) – despite the fact that Kerschensteiner and Spranger emphasized the importance of independent thinking. The parameters of this independent thinking were *within* the status quo, one might argue. Interestingly, the consolidating nature of discourses on *Bildung* in vocational education are prevalent to this day – even though the current status quo might be better characterized not in terms of social stability and processes of nation-state formation, but in terms of employability, flexibility and life-long learning (Zuurmond et al. 2023). Walter Bauer, for example, has argued in his publication on the relevance of *Bildung* for democracy, how we still should be wary of this notion in education as he perceives how a theory "on neo-liberal models of privatisation and commodification of education" results in the phenomenon that "*Bildung* is again in the process of turning into an individual asset. Defined economically, this individual asset is designed to provide lifelong fitness for globalised labour markets and global competition" (Bauer 2003, 222).

Particularly current critiques formulated on recent policies of citizenship, *Bildung* and critical thinking in vocational education overlap with the hesitations about the early 20th century *Berufsbildung* devised by Kerschensteiner and Spranger: these policies and practices reveal a strong emphasis on conformity and

communality (van der Ploeg and Guérin 2016; Zuurmond et al. 2023). Even though critical thinking and moral reflection in vocational education are propagated in policy documents, these capacities should clearly not infringe upon the students' employability. Students in vocational education are first and foremost trained to adhere to standard (company) rules and procedures, as Laurence Guérin (2017) has showed in her work on vocational education and citizenship in the Netherlands. How much scope is there then to critically question widely accepted procedures or to devise alternative values, to question the status quo of a company, or critically reflect upon existing norms and standards in a profession (Guérin 2017)? In a more general sense, we return to the initial question formulated at the beginning of this paper: how can we prevent vocational education to become a mere training for employability, and retain a form of 'suspension' for the educational realm?

This is where the thoughts of Simone Weil on vocational education might help us. Whereas discourses of general formation in vocational education need to alert us to the pitfalls of consolidation and conformism (whether state- or market-based), Weil proposes a re-thinking of vocational education as a means of transforming society. Instead of *countering* social unrest, as Spranger and Kerschensteiner's hidden agenda was perceived, we can interpret Weil's ideas perhaps a bit provocatively as giving tools for *creating* social unrest. Her agenda is revolutionary – even though Weil was very critical of the idea of a future Marxist revolution, because this absolves us from the obligation to address concrete problems in the present. With a nod to Marx, she argued that "[i]t is not religion but revolution which is the opium of the people"(Weil 2002a, 181).

Still, I would characterize Weil's educational ideas as establishing an *epistemological* revolution. In a letter to a former student, she expresses her continuing commitment to workers' education as follows: "The most important is the popularization of knowledge, and especially of scientific knowledge" (Weil 2023a). And in an essay on science ("Sur la science"), she observed: "Science is a monopoly … non-scientists have access only to the results, not to the methods, that is to say they can only believe, not assimilate" (in Blum and Seidler 2010, 113). A fundamental change in society is therefore necessary, and this is the revolutionary aspect of her thinking. As she wrote in 1933, in a circular for the Teachers Union:

> […] we should never forget that our task is the preparation of a society 'in which the degrading division of work into manual work and intellectual work

> will be abolished' (Marx). Among all the particular tasks implied by this general task, one of the most important is to create (…) the basis for a true diffusion of knowledge. (Pétrement 1976, 146).

Weil thus seeks to end a type of oppression that is not resolved in a classless society, or a restructuring of property rights, but by abolishing the differences between knowing and not-knowing, understanding and applying, controlling and executing.

This re-ordering of society starts with education so that we can understand the nature of the processes that underly our work activities. As Lawrence Blum and Victor Seidler explain in their work on Weil and Marxism:

> This emphasis on education is not meant to imply that Weil thought that workers would be freed from oppression merely by studying. Rather, the requisite knowledge can be fully gained only by challenging the power that management and capital now exert over the worker, since that power partly consists in their monopoly on the understanding of the processes of work. The gaining of knowledge must go hand in hand with this challenge to managerial power. (Blum and Seidler 2010, 29)

Weil's epistemological revolution through education would lead to a society in which labor is liberated – and by true liberty, Weil aims at the restauration of relation between thinking and acting during work, which she perceives as an impossibility to many in her time. In her "Reflections concerning the Causes of Liberty and Oppression", she claims:

> True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action; the absolute free man would be he whose every action proceeded preliminary judgement concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end. (Weil 2001, 81)

Weil's thoughts on vocational education in relation to the German tradition of *Berufsbildung* shed light on the fact that a plea for general formation or *Bildung* in vocational education does not necessarily have to imply a strategic agenda of consolidating existing power structures – which we can perceive not only in the ideas of Kerschen Steiner and Spranger, but also in current discourses. Weil's thinking on vocational education is from the perspective of workers instead of employers, and the societal restructuring she envisages begins with an equal access to knowledge and a communal understanding of fundamental scientific principles underlying our activities. This concern stayed with her throughout her life. Indeed, according to

Father Perrin, who took care of her legacy, the last sentence she wrote in her notebook before her passing away was: "the most important part of education – to teach the meaning of 'to know' (in scientific sense)"(Miles 2005, 51).

How may these ideas be translated into modern-day policies in vocational training? I am well aware that the factory work described by Weil hardly resembles current working conditions – still, her premonition of a managerial rise in the structuring of labor seems accurate and very up to date, and her ideas on education are useful to grapple with the conservative tendencies in pleas for general formation or *Bildung* in professional training. From a general point of view, translating her educational ideas into current practice would mean the reorganization of the school system in such a way that practically and theoretically orientated students would not be enrolling into different school types at an early age, but remain grouped together for a longer time. It would also mean: less focus on grades and exams, and more on training the attention. But most interestingly, it challenges us to rethink the role of *science* in the curriculum and to be aware of the hazard of conformism in vocational education. Instead of only getting to know professional protocols and procedures, students also need to be equipped with how those protocols came about, or what the workings behind these procedures are. For example: students working in security or taxes need to know the fundamentals of how an algorithm works in their field of expertise. Students in education need to be aware of the role of educational sciences in policies and practices, and to be able to think critically about a notion such as 'evidence based'. Whereas general competences such as flexibility, creativity and entrepreneurship are now propagated in vocational education, we might also want to incorporate other "general competencies", such as knowledge of workers' rights, participation in employee's organizations, or the activities of trade unions. These ideas might help us in envisioning vocational schools not as mere preparatory institutes in which a future workforce is trained – but schools where workers are educated in an (Arendtian) space and time, not dictated by the necessities of the work floor and the prerequisites of employers.

The groundwork for Weil's thinking on education lies on the work floor, and of course one can raise the critical question if she was really in a position to experience what it was like to work as an unskilled factory worker. After all: unlike all other workers, Weil had a strong social and financial safety net and was able to get a well-paid job in education again. And did she really have in-depth conversations with her colleagues during this regime that only lasted for nine months? Or is her

emphasis on the importance of thinking at work merely an intellectual's projection? I would argue that her efforts to understand the worker's plight are sincere, in line with Peter Roberts's rebuttal of this critique:

> Weil may have spent just nine months in a factory, but that is nine months more than many intellectuals. Weil may have had her parents as a 'safety net', but (to continue the analogy) she walked a tightrope as if such a net did not exist. (Roberts 2011, 326)

A more fundamental point of critique that has been raised to Weil's thinking on labor, is the fact that her idea of citizenship and the political realm seems to be completely absent. As Mary Dietz (1988) suggests, juxtaposing the work of Arendt and Weil, Simone Weil only reflects on liberty through the perspective of labor, leaving aside the political realm where people act not as workers, but as citizens. This indeed seems a problematic aspect in her thinking, especially in education, which is by many understood as the realm where young people are prepared for citizenship. I think Simone Weil would counter that argument by stating that people cannot take part in political life as equal citizens if they are treated fundamentally different at work. In *The Need for Roots*, she argues poignantly about working-class culture:

> The mind is essentially free and sovereign when it is really and truly exercised. To be free and sovereign, as a thinking being, for one hour or two, and a slave for the rest of the day, is such an agonizing spiritual quartering that it is almost impossible not to renounce, so as to escape it, the highest forms of thought. (Weil 2002b, 67)

Weil reminds us of how a transformation of labor conditions is necessary for any societal change to come about, and her analysis of knowledge and oppression – informed by her experience in factories – leaves us with provocative ideas on a type of education that might bring about such transformations on the work floor.

Conclusion

In one of the Routledge series "Key Guides", entitled *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education. From Piaget to the Present* (Palmer 2001), Simone Weil is characterized as a "neo-Platonic, Christian mystic" (ibid., 69), advocating schools where "meditation" and "the capacity for quiet contemplation" (ibid., 72) are taught. Even though her later writings might indicate such descriptions, I would argue that Weil

should also be positioned in other traditions in educational thinking. I can see important resemblances between her work on restoring the connection between thinking and acting and the work of the French philosopher Michel Serres, for example. Her emphasis on the bodily experience of learning and her repeated use of the words 'seizing' or 'grasping' as synonyms for knowing, as Blum and Seidler (2010, 112) notice, indicates that knowledge of the world is a physical as well as a mental act – an idea that is important to Serres as well. And also, in line with the ideas of Serres is that Weil takes into account that science is not neutral; it can be utilized for the betterment of the elites, or in imperialist policies. Another tradition Weil could very well be repositioned in, is the strand of thinking that understands education as having transformative capacities – and more specifically, the capacity to create a more just society, as proponents of critical pedagogy, such as Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, might argue.

My initial starting point was the potential merging of schools and businesses – and informed by the work of Arendt, I asked if we can imagine a co-operation between education and the world of labor without the field of schooling being overruled by the field of economics. Or: are we able to prevent that vocational education becomes a mere training to create an efficient workforce? Even though discourses on general formation and *Bildung* in vocational education have indicated a strong tendency to consolidate existing societal or market power structures, Simone Weil's struggle for 'thoughtful labor' draws our attention to the fact that schools can retain their separateness in society, or their 'suspension', whilst at the same time cooperating with the field of labor. I suggest that the work of Simone Weil stands in a tradition of educational thinkers, who remind us of the potential *revolutionary* character of education – also, or maybe even *especially*, when schools form close alliances with the work floor in vocational education.

Ass. Prof. Dr. Anouk Zuurmond, Faculty of Behavioral and Movement Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, a.zuurmond[at]vu.nl

References

Arendt, Hannah. 1961. "The Crisis in Education." In *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought*, 173–96. London: Faber and Faber.

Bauer, Walter. 2003. "On the Relevance of Bildung for Democracy." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35 (2): 211–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-5812.00020.

Blum, Lawrence A., and Victor J. Seidler. 2010. *A Truer Liberty. Simone Weil and Marxism*. London: Routledge.

Dewey, John. 1966. *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan.

Dietz, Mary G. 1988. *Between the Human and the Divine. The Political Thought of Simone Weil*. New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gonon, Philipp. 2022. "The Legitimation of School-Based Bildung in the Context of Vocational Education and Training: The Legacy of Eduard Spranger." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12678.

Grey, Christopher. 1996. "Towards a Critique of Managerialism: The Contribution of Simone Weil." *Journal of Management Studies* 33 (5): 591–612.

Guérin, L.J.F. 2017. "Group Problem Solving as a Different Participatory Approach to Citizenship Education." *Journal of Social Science Education* 16 (2): 7–17. https://doi.org/10.2390/jsse-v16-i2-1608.

Hinchliffe, Geoffrey. 2022. "Citizenship and the Joy of Work." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12675.

Knoll, Michael. 2017. "'Two Roads to Culture': John Dewey Und Georg Kerschensteiner Im Streit Um Die Berufs- und Allgemeinbildung." https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316635646.

Kuhlee, Dina, Christian Steib, and Christopher Winch. 2022. "Founding German Vocational Education: Kerschensteiner, Spranger and Fischer as Key Figures in the Classical German VET Theory." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12669.

Masschelein, Jan, and Maarten Simons. 2010. "The Hatred of Public Schooling: The School as the Mark of Democracy." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42 (5–6): 666–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00692.x.

Meltzer, Françoise. 2001. "The Hands of Simone Weil." *Critical Inquiry* 27 (4): 611–28.

Miles, Siân. 2005. "Introduction." In *Simone Weil. An Anthology*, edited by Siân Miles, 1–68. London: Penguin Books.

Nye, Andrea. 1994. *Philosophia. The Thought of Rosa Luxemburg, Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt.* New York / London: Routledge.

Palmer, Joy A., ed. 2001. *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education. From Piaget to the Present*. London: Routledge.

Pétrement, Simone. 1976. *Simone Weil. A Life*. New York: Schocken Books.

Ploeg, P. A. van der, and L.J.F. Guérin. 2016. "Questioning Participation and Solidarity as Goals of Citizenship Education." *Critical Review* 28 (2): 248–64.

Roberts, Peter. 2011. "Attention, Asceticism, and Grace: Simone Weil and Higher Education." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10 (3): 315–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022211408037

Sanderse, Wouter. 2021. "Vocational Education and Bildung: A Marriage or Divorce?" *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 1–18.

Simons, Diane. 1966. *Georg Kerschensteiner. His Thought and Its Relevance Today*. London: Methuen & Co.

Sloane, Peter F.E. 2022. "Re-Reading Kerschensteiner Today: Doing VET in German Vocational Schools – A Search for Traces." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12674.

Spranger, Eduard. 2022. "The Educational Task of the German Vocational School (1958)." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12671

Tuck McFarland, Dorothy, and Wilhelmina Van Ness. 1987. "Introduction." In *Formative Writings 1929 - 1941*, edited by Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness, 3–20. Massachusetts: The University of Massachusettes Press.

Waslander, Sietske. 2021. *Het Publieke Karakter van Onderwijs*. Tilburg: TIAS School for Business and Society.

Weil, Simone. 1987. "Factory Journal." In *Formative Writings 1929 - 1941*, edited by Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness, 149–226. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Weil, Simone. 2001. *Oppression and Liberty*. London: Routledge.

Weil, Simone. 2002a. "The Mysticism of Work." In *Gravity and Grace*, 178–81. London: Routledge.

Weil, Simone. 2002b. *The Need for Roots. Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*. London and New York: Routledge.

Weil, Simone. 2009. "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God." In *Waiting for God*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Weil, Simone.. 2023a. "Letter to a Student." https://Theviolentbearitaway1.Wordpress.Com/2015/09/04/Letter-to-a-Student , accessed March 29, 2023.

Weil, Simone. 2023b. "Meditation on Obedience an Liberty." https://Theanarchistlibrary.Org/Library/Simone-Weil-Oppression-and-Liberty#toc15, accessed March 29, 2023.

Zuurmond, Anouk, Laurence Guérin, Piet van der Ploeg, and Daan van Riet. 2023. "Learning to Question the Status Quo. Critical Thinking, Citizenship Education and Bildung in Vocational Education." *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2023.2166573.