

The struggle to belong
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Educational research in the field of community building

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Introduction

Educational research in the field of community building often means researching what works to create a better community. This entails a specific connection between education on the one hand and community on the other. Learning is thereby conceived as a process that leads to improved ways of living together. Educational practices thereby are seen as interventions that produce certain results, and educational research is an evaluation of the learning process leading to better communities. In this paper we would like to question these relations between education and community. Starting point is our own attempt to do research on a community arts project in Brussels: the Zinneke Parade. The Zinneke Parade is a biannual artistic parade in Brussels. During the parade, about 2500 people march and dance through the streets of the Brussels city-centre and about 80.000 spectators look at the parade. In 2010, 25 groups participated in the parade. Each one of those groups is a temporarily collaboration of existing organizations from Brussels and beyond. The groups actively recruit a variety of participants: French speaking and Dutch speaking Belgians, EU expats working in Brussels, asylum seekers and immigrants from various backgrounds, children and elderly, mentally and physically disabled. In the summer and fall of 2009 most of these temporarily groups got organized. During the months leading to the parade, these mixed groups work together with artists in workshops, meetings and rehearsals. They dance, improvise and develop a choreography and storyline. They fabricate costumes, all kinds of attributes and wagons. As researchers we engaged in participant observations during the workshops and made film recordings of public try-outs and of the parade on the 10th of May 2010. We also studied the subsidy requests, policy documents and the organization process of some of the groups. The Zinneke Parade is funded by several policy bodies: different municipalities in Brussels, the Belgian federal state, the Brussels Region, the Flemish and French Community and the EU Culture and Education Programme. Subsidy requests show several aims linked to what we call creating better communities or better ways of living together. The general aim of the project in these documents is described as follows (Zinneke vzw 2009, p. 3-4, own translation):

The Zinneke parade is an intensive collaboration and creation process, aimed at the realisation of a social and artistic dynamic between inhabitants, organisations, schools and artist from different neighbourhoods in Brussels and beyond, and resulting in a colourful parade. It is a call for a communal realisation, a collective creation, a call for a walking spectacle whereby partners from varying horizons share a common philosophy and ethics, namely the promotion of living together in cultural diversity in Brussels. The different groups should aim to use and show the urban energy in the neighbourhoods. Each and every Zinneke group develops from the ideas and proposals of the participants. Zinneke wants to create a refuge for new and non-existing collaborations and encounters between amateurs and professionals, between generations, between social and cultural groups, between neighbourhoods and municipalities, between inhabitants from Brussels, Flanders and the Walloons... The exchange of visions and competences is central to this. Stimulating the imagination and creative meanings of inhabitants is at stake. Zinneke wants to give the city back to its inhabitants, by conquering the public space of the neighbourhoods and the city-centre. It strives for cultural democratisation on the one hand and the creation of a new event in Brussels with surprising (inter)national charisma on the other hand, in the light of a sustainable urban development.

In our research, we were interested to find out how community is created during the process of Zinneke. We wanted to explore how community is shaped in this project and how learning to deal with others is related to the artistic process. In order to elaborate our research methodology and our general approach, we explored some previous research about community arts (Aprill and Townsell 2007, Clover 2006, Demeyer and Van Pee 2003, Dennis 2004, Greene 1995, Leye and Janssens 2004, Lowe 2000, Matarasso 1997, Wesley 2007). It struck us that researchers interested in community arts mainly try to support these practices by proving their value and use for social aims. There were of course a wide range of social aims: community development (Lowe 2000), social integration (Demeyer & Van Pee 2003), living together (Leye 2004), or culture and antiracism (Clover 2006). Regardless of the concrete formulation of one or other community ideal, researchers were looking for what works to create desired social outcomes. In Belgium, there has been a lively debate within the artistic community about the so called instrumentalization of arts for social benefits. Some emphasize the potential of arts for excluded groups (Van Looveren 2008). Others take a more critical stance, mainly from an artistic point of view. Laermans (2002a, 2002b) for example, stresses that these projects might be very creative, but therefore not yet a form of art. There has thus been some caution within the world of arts. We, however, would like to question the relation between community and learning practices from an educational point of view, and draw conclusions for the sense of educational research.

The desire to rethink the sense of educational research in the field of community building did not only result from an exploration of previous research. It became imminent during our observation period, from December 2009 until May 2010. The challenge during this observation period was to find an appropriate way of looking at what was happening before our eyes. Sometimes, while sitting aside and jotting down field notes, we felt a strong force to immediately judge what was happening from our community ideals. When once, an artist declared to the participants that they were going to make heads, using these materials and proceeding like this and that, we could not help taking a great distance and judge that this was not an appropriate participatory way of working. On other moments we were so close to the activities in the workshops that we experienced a number of participants laughing and talking as uncooperative and as blocking the learning process towards community integration. This is not different from other research experiences (Emerson et al. 1995, Hansen 2007, Phillion 2002). What was most interesting for us, however, were those moments where we could observe without community ideals troubling our way of looking. There were moments where community ideals became irrelevant. A very impressive moment was the picking up of clothes out of a pile. We were watching the picking up, bending down, coming up, holding of shirts, fitting of coats, showing and turning of bodies, looking in the mirror. The scene made us forget what we were looking for. The movements seemed only to refer to the activity at hand. It was an apparently ordinary scene that for a moment suspended our will to know and look for learning processes towards a better community. These moments changed the way we related to the present (Cornelissen and Masschelein 2010). These moments made us question the way we were doing research about community building.

A final take off for rethinking the relations between community and educational practices stems from the theoretical work of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 1992, 2000, 2003). During our exploration of literature on community building, we found some references to the work of Nancy (Helstein 2005, Kohn and Cain 2005, Panelli and Welch 2005, Rose 1997, Secomb 2000, Welch and Panelli 2007). Secomb (2000), for example, uses Nancy's approach of community to rethink the relations between

Aboriginal groups and Australian policies aimed at creating a national community. For Nancy, community is not about unity and agreement. Community is what troubles the formation of unity. It is what disrupts and fractures commonality. Therefore, according to Secomb (2000), Aboriginal groups should not be seen as outside 'the' community and in need of integration. These groups are in relation to other Australians in their resistance to a unified identity. Community here is being together without being the same and without agreement on shared goals. A similar use of Nancy's work can be found in Welch and Panelli (2007). They start from a theoretical exploration of Nancy and suggest some possibilities for empirical and policy oriented geographical research: "For human geography, the challenge is to position itself so that it can constructively critique policy predicated on problematic and illusory notions of 'common-being' community; to do this via rigorous theorization and empirical exploration of the way beings engage with collectives" (Welch & Panelli 2007, p. 352). Rethinking community as the engagement of different beings without common belonging and identity can have a huge impact on research in the field of community building. The attention of researchers then moves from what works to create community to the different possible ways that people engage with each other. This implies an empirical focus on the concrete engagement taking place in practices. It implies a way of looking that does not start from community ideals but is interested in concrete ways of relating. In our contribution we will connect the rethinking of community in Nancy's work specifically with educational research. This does not only imply a rethinking of the notion community. It also implies a rethinking of the notion of building or working towards community, understood as educational process. In this paper, we will explore Nancy's critique on community as an ideal realized or produced through work. We will relate this critique to two traditions in adult education: a tradition that relates community to social cohesion and a tradition that appeals to community as antidote to oppression and marginalization.

Realizing community as work

Educational research about what works to create better communities (Clover and Stalker 2005, Millar and Kilpatrick 2005, see for example Rossing and Glowacki-Dudka 2001) is based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that researchers can know what a good community is. Researchers proceed as if they know where we should go with the community. We see this in the – often short – descriptions and discussions researchers offer on the way forward. Moreover, we see this in the overall research design. Researchers are looking for what works to reach a certain ideal community. There are great differences between the normative stances on the desired future of the community. What is of interest to us, however, is the assumption that *community* is something that can be defined within a normative discourse. This assumption entails more than a normative stance. It entails a certain way of thinking about community. According to Roberto Esposito (2000, p. 14, own translation), community is reduced to a kind of object when it is postulated as a normative ideal: "The truth is that all these conceptions are linked by the unreflected assumption that community is 'a property' of the subjects that she unites – a quality, a determination, a predicate that qualifies them as belonging to the same whole – or, otherwise, that she is a 'substance' produced by their union."¹ For Esposito (2000) community is something we cannot know in advance, cannot know as an abstract ideal. He speaks about community as unthinkable (*impensabilité*). When we reduce community to a

¹ « En vérité, toutes ces conceptions sont liées par le présupposé non-réfléchi que la communauté est une « propriété » des sujets qu'elle réunit – un attribut, une détermination, un prédicat qui les qualifie comme appartenant à un même ensemble – ou bien encore, qu'elle est une « substance » produite par leur union » (Esposito 2000, p. 14).

property within one or other philosophical or political discourse, we actually distort what we try to name. We do need to think differently about community. Esposito (2000) claims that nothing is more urgent than rethinking community. All kinds of normative definitions and programmatic notions are all but a rethinking of community. They stay within the framework of classical notions, they keep thinking community as a vast entity that we can lose or recreate. It is precisely this language of lost past and future to come that needs rethinking: “the language of the individual *and* totality, of identity *and* particularity, of origin *and* ending, or more simply of the *subject*, with all its typical metaphysical connotations of unity, absoluteness and interiority” (ibid., p. 14, own translation)².

The second assumption of educational research in the field of community building is that educational practices can realize or build community through specific interventions. It is assumed that a certain practice will lead to certain desired changes in the community. Together with this assumption goes the idea that educational research can effectively uncover whether the practice works or not. Gert Biesta (2007, 2009, 2010) is amongst those who critique the idea that educational practice should become an evidence-based practice and that educational research should only look for evidence about the effectiveness of educational practices. Biesta’s work deals with education in general and in the research he discusses “the focus tends to be on one particular kind of scientific research, namely *experimental research*, and more specifically, the randomized control trial” (Biesta 2010, p. 494). The research we deal with is on community building and uses varied approaches to generate knowledge about what works. The critiques that Biesta formulates however also apply to educational research in the field of community building. Here, educational practices are also seen as *interventions* (Biesta 2007). This means practices are thought of as treatment for a malfunctioning community, which implies that they should have certain effects. This is why the question what works is also central in community building research. When practices are interventions, they need to have good results or outcomes. There is no other possible sense for educational practices in this line of thought. This is what Biesta (2007, p. 7) calls “a causal model of professional action.” Educational practices are interventions that cause certain results or outcomes, which are considered as effects. This is of course related to desired outcomes in line with the normative stances on community. These specific connections between research and practice hide the normative stances, according to Biesta (2010). When we apply the results of research on what works, we also apply the normative stances that determined the way effectiveness was measured. We actually only know what happened on one specific occasion, researched from one normative stance. This does not legitimize that educational practice elsewhere should develop in the same way. In the words of Biesta (2010, p. 500): “The idea that practices can change through the application of scientific knowledge makes the work that is done to transform practices so that knowledge can begin to work invisible.” In other words, when we install practices starting from research on what works, the ideal of community behind the research gets out of sight. When implementing this kind of knowledge, practitioners imitate the conditions from another situation in the past. It might be possible that something interesting happened in the practices educational researchers study. This, however does not imply that we have to install these practices elsewhere in order for some result to show up.

² « Mais c’est précisément en réduisant la communauté à un « objet » que le discours philosophico-politique la soumet à un langage conceptuel qui la distord alors même qu’il essaie de la nommer, à savoir le langage de l’individu *et* de la totalité, de l’identité *et* de la particularité, de l’origine *et* de la fin, ou plus simplement du *sujet*, avec toutes ses typiques connotations métaphysiques d’unité, d’absoluité et d’intériorité » (ibidem).

The assumption that we can actually know what a good community is and that we can realize the good community through some kind of intervention or work is extensively criticized by Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 1992, 2000, 2003). This way of thinking is much older than the current upheaval of communitarianism. It is present in communist, Christian and nationalist endeavors. "Community effecting itself as its own work" is for Nancy (2003, p. 30) the essential characteristic of totalitarianism. It is totalitarian because it assumes knowledge and transparency of individuals and groups and because it assumes individuals can be modeled or made. For Nancy (1991, p. 31), this is however no longer possible nor desirable:

This is why community cannot arise from the domain of *work*. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude. Community understood as work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects). Products derived from operations of this kind, however grandiose they might seek to be and sometimes manage to be, have no more communitarian existence than the plaster busts of Marianne.

Taking a normative stance on community and then working towards it, does no longer make any sense for Nancy. This way of thinking about community has come to an end. Community as unity and as producible is what has been shattered over the last century. It has become clear that community realizing itself as work always leads towards exclusions and injustice. This does not only hold for extreme versions of totalitarianism, it is also true for democratic regimes. Even when democratic regimes try to produce an ideal community, this is a form of injustice. Community as work needs definitions, and these definitions in themselves do injustice to the openness that characterizes human relations. Humans are characterized by an absence of essence, that sometimes might even seem banal: "Common: banal, trivial. We appear before our banality, before the exceptional absence of a "condition" which one has always too quickly baptized "human." Common: not made from a single substance, but to the contrary from the lack of a substance which essentially apportions the lack of essence" (Nancy, 1992, p. 374). Community ideals define an identity or essence, and in this way, they exclude precisely what characterizes human togetherness, a lack of essence or and experience of finitude. This is for Nancy (1992, p. 392) injustice, not on an abstract level, but very concrete:

The working of injustice is always, in some manner, an exclusion. And as one knows well, community (in its organic or mystical conception, that is, essentially, in its known philosophical and political forms) always excludes and on principle. Such exclusion can be named distinction, exile, banishment, sacrifice, disdain, marginal distinction, exile, banishment, sacrifice, disdain, selection, election, roots, and so on³. At the bottom, that which the community wants to exclude is that which does not let itself be identified in it.

The origin of many concrete forms of injustice like marginalization or normalization are related to a specific way of thinking about community. This does not at all mean we have to stop thinking about what human community or human togetherness means. For Nancy, it has become clear that community must be rethought, not as something, not as an essence that can be known and defined. Community must be rethought as our condition of existence. It is experienced before any ideal, before any project. It is not something we know like a concept or theory. There is no theory, ethics,

³ The English enumeration differs significantly from the French original, where also identification and normalization are mentioned: "L'exclusion peut se nommer distinction, exil, bannissement, sacrifice, mépris, marginalisation, identification, normalisation, sélection, élection, racines, etc." (Nancy 2007).

politics, or metaphysics that is capable of defining community. Community is what happens to us. It is what takes place when we are close to others. It is always moving, passing by. The logic of totalitarianism, defining community and producing it, is what makes community impossible. Totalitarianism freezes social relations, it produces certain relations like a plaster busts. This is not how community happens: “community has never taken place along the lines of our projections of it according to these different social forms” (Nancy, 1991, p. 11). The task for Nancy is in the first place thinking of community. The old ideals no longer make sense, and we do not know how to deal with the presence of so many different people, for example in a city like Brussels. The most important task therefore is the do research about what it means to exist together with others. This is a philosophical work for Nancy (2003, p. 33-34), but it might also be at stake when doing empirical educational research on community building:

It falls to us to think from this starting point: without god or master, without common substance, what is the secret of ‘community’ or *being-with*? We have not yet sufficiently thought through the unoccupancy of community, thought through what the possibility of sharing out a secret without divulging might consist in: in what it might consist to share that secret out precisely without divulging it to ourselves, amongst ourselves.

Two traditions in adult education

The critique on community as work and the rethinking of human existence with others as lack of condition and lack of essence is easy to translate in a critique on the whole idea and the entire practice of community building. This might however be a bit too easy and a bit too hasty. We should not be blind for different traditions related to community building and citizenship education (Jansen et al. 2006, van der Veen 2003, Wildemeersch and Vandenaabeele 2010). We would like to explore two different traditions here, in an effort to rethink the sense of community building and to work towards another sense of educational research in this field. The first tradition conceptualizes community building as the improvement of social cohesion. The social cohesion tradition is wider than the field of adult education and entails a number of dimensions. Some analysis help to uncover the logic of this nowadays influential approach (Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003, Kearns and Forrest 2000, Robinson 2005, Rose 1996).

The social cohesion tradition aims to realize a community that is closely integrated, that is productive and that has no internal conflicts. Kearns and Forrest (2000, p. 996) distinguish four interlinked dimensions: “common values and a civic culture; social order and social control; social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities; social networks and social capital; and territorial belonging and identity.” Community building in this tradition is seen as an investment in a particular kind of social relations, where all share the same values and agree on future projects. Relations should be mutual and supportive and individuals should identify with their community. Individuals are responsible for their community and are called upon to be cooperative and to work towards common goals. In the words of Robinson (2005, p. 1417), commenting specifically on UK policies: “Community cohesion is recognized as a vehicle for promoting a particular model of citizenship and asserting civic order. Segregation is problematised within this narrative if it is perceived to result in communities that assert moral commitments considered to be at odds with the dominant moral order.” The shared values and moral commitments, promoted by the social cohesion tradition are normatively loaded. What is expected is adaptation to certain values, i.e. a certain conformism and a certain normalization.

Social cohesion in this tradition is related to a kind of investment in social relations. The investment in social cohesion is expected to yield future revenues. Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003, p. 83) argue: “In this discourse, it is acceptable for the state to spend generously when, and only when, it is behaving like a good business would, seeking to increase the promise of *future profits*.” The kind of future revenue social cohesion promises seems to be related to economic objectives. According to Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003), a loss of social cohesion is in the first place dangerous for economic competitiveness. One consequence is that investments in social cohesion must pay off. Investments, for example in social and cultural organizations who are instructed to promote community building must be used effectively and the goal to be reached is clear from the outset. This is where educational researchers show up. The most comprehensive policy oriented research on community arts in Flanders, for example, is conceptualized along these lines. The aim of the research is to develop a methodology for community arts projects, that enables “efficiency” and “effectiveness” and avoids “failures and fiascos” so that government investments “can yield optimal results” (Demeyer & Van Pee 2003, p. 21-22). Another research in this tradition was reported in *Studies in the Education of Adults* by Millar and Kilpatrick (2005). Community building here is linked with social capital building. Millar and Kilpatrick (2005, p. 28) start from a specific community ideal and use leadership learning processes to evaluate the effectiveness of different projects: “Communities the world over need to develop the skills and understanding to take on responsibilities for their own development outcomes. (...) The long-term success of the projects will only be apparent if the projects reach the sustainability stage of the leadership process. Only then can we say that community capacity has been increased.”

The social cohesion tradition can be criticized from Nancy’s point of view. Community is a matter of investment or work in this tradition, and community does operate as an ideal to be reached by practice and evaluated by research. This approach to community as work leads for Nancy to injustice and oppression. The specificity of the community ideals promoted in the social cohesion tradition is that they are restricted to social relations. This is what Nikolas Rose (1996, p. 332) analyses as “government through community.” Social relations are relations of allegiance and responsibility to those we care about and to those who are like us. Investments in these relations are a part of government policies. Governments target certain communities and community identification is used to mobilize individuals to work towards certain policy goals. Relations of contestation and conflict are absent or seen as deficient in this tradition in community building. According to Rose (1996, p. 332) there has however been a period where community was evoked as language of resistance and critique: “This idea of community as lost authenticity and common belonging was initially deployed in the social field as part of the language of critique and opposition directed against remote bureaucracy. Community activists were to identify, not with a welfare system that they saw as degrading, policing and controlling, but with those who were the subjects of that system – the inhabitants of the housing estates, projects and ghettos.” This brings us to a second and more critical tradition in adult education that appeals to community as antidote to oppression and marginalization. This critical tradition had, according to Gillian Rose (1997, p. 3), a strong influence during the early years of community arts movement: “The community arts movement began in the late 1960s in Europe, North America and Australasia. Its diverse practices all depend on a critique of the mass media and high arts as reproducing only ruling-class ideologies by assuming a consensual set of values, and that outside this centre are other groups with different values who are excluded from the means of public self-expression. Community arts practitioners address themselves to such

marginalized groups, using arts practices of all kinds to give them the skills and opportunities to articulate their worldview.” This tradition within adult education and community building emphasizes difference and different social positions. It emphasizes conflicts between different groups regarding values and culture and regarding the means or power to express their worldview.

Young (1986, p. 1) has already criticized this “appeal to an ideal of community as an alternative to the oppression and exploitation” in 1986. For Young, these appeals often not explicitly articulate the meaning of the concept of community. Moreover, she claims that the ideal of community precisely denies differences between subjects and always works as a unification through some kind of sharing: “persons will cease to be opaque, other, not understood, and instead become fused, mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they understand themselves. Such an ideal of shared subjectivity, or the transparency of subjects to one another, denies differences in the sense of the basic asymmetry of subjects” (ibid., p. 10). The critique of Young is consistent with Nancy’s work on at least two points. Firstly, both take the irreducible differences between humans seriously and conclude that it is not possible to define an ideal community. Together with this, they both hold on to the constant possibility of both injustice and change. In the words of Young (ibid., p. 17): “No telos of the final society exists, moreover; society understood as a moving and contradictory process implies that change for the better is always possible and always necessary.” A second point of convergence is that both Young and Nancy start from the actual ways people engage with each other. The present, in its most concrete form is the point of departure for thinking about human togetherness. While Nancy however still uses the word community or being with, Young (1986, p. 21) calls her alternative the politics of difference and she refers to the concrete engagement in public spaces in cities as alternative for close knit communities:

A public space is a space accessible to anyone, where people engage in activity as individuals or in small groups. In public spaces people are aware of each other’s presence and even at times attend to it. In the city there are a multitude of such public spaces, streets, restaurants, concert halls, parks. In such public spaces the diversity of the city’s residents come together and dwell side by side, sometimes appreciating one another, entertaining one another, or just chatting, always to go off again as strangers.

In spite of the dominance of the social cohesion tradition, we still find researchers working from a more critical perspective, evoking community against oppressive structures. The definitions of community are more open to difference than in the social cohesion tradition. There is an awareness of different normative stances and the possible homogenizing effects of community ideology thought as consensus. Against homogenization, this tradition of critical community practice nowadays promotes “opening up the community to itself and to its Other to promote disorientation and reorientation, multiplicities of knowing and understanding ourselves and our relations to our neighbours in our communities so that we may make decisions within a multitude of different perspectives” (Cowell 2010, p. 4). There are also examples of empirical research in line with this tradition. Rossing and Glowacki-Dudka (2001, p. 729-730) for example start from the “adverse consequences of eroded local communities” due to “the emergence of a global capitalist economy dominated by multinational corporations” and the failing of “bureaucratic remedies.” They study small group dialogues in Madison (USA), which are conceptualized as “efforts to create public spaces for community renewal using narrative and dialogue processes” (ibid., p. 731). The idea is that through processes of storytelling and dialogue within public spaces, new relations can be formed, in other words, community can be build. Rossing and Glowacki-Dudka (2001) conclude that “a carefully constructed dialogue process can enable sharing of diverse views and experiences and develop a sense of community without silencing marginal voices” (ibid., p. 740). Another example is a special issue of *Convergence*, titled *Social justice, arts and adult education*. In their guest editorial, Clover

and Stalker (2005, p. 3) refer to “increased social and political exclusion and marginalization, poverty, environmental degradation and acute feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.” Against this situation, arts are mobilized as spaces of resistance, leading to both justice and community: “The purpose of this edition is to highlight a variety of arts and crafts based learning practices used by adult educators to reclaim knowledge, promote activism, raise consciousness, challenge hegemony, build community, deal with community loss and work towards social justice” (ibid., p. 4). Elsewhere, Clover (2006) reports an empirical research into practices of collective arts-based learning. The purpose of her research is “to explore the characteristics of arts-based learning that make them valuable tools of cultural and antiracist adult education” (Clover 2006, p. 49). The conclusion of this research that “we require learning processes that allow people to speak in creative and imaginative ways about new racial and cultural connections, as these projects did so well” (ibid., p. 59).

Possibilities

In this second tradition, evoking community against repression, we find some indications of how to proceed with community building. Community here, is not defined as a clear-cut ideal, that can unproblematically be produced as work. Community in this tradition is a site of struggle between different groups. Humans differ from each other and this requires a certain openness and an awareness of normative stances and power relations. Educational practices like community arts or dialogue groups are seen as public places, this is, places where new relations can take shape and where unanticipated engagements with strangers can happen. Although community is seen as more open, some would say political (Young 1986), we do think that the consequences of this new way of dealing with community are not always thought through. It is as if there are no implications for the meaning of educational research. Researchers still try to look for what works (small dialogue groups or arts projects) to create community. It is as if community is still something that can be lost and rebuild. What this means is that even where there is openness regarding the precise ideal of community, community is still thought as if it is a property, concept or characteristic. Community is still treated as if it is a matter of work or investment even if we can give no clear definition. The result of this is that community is still mobilized as an ideal or “elusive goal” (Millar & Kilpatrick 2005) and that research still looks for what works. In so doing, community as openness starts to work as another, new community ideal, with the same repressive consequences as old ideals. We think that in order avoid that new community ideals work within the same oppressive framework as old religious, capitalist or nationalist ideals, it is necessary to think through the consequences of community as unknowable condition in educational research. This means we have to redefine the relations between community and education and between educational practices and research. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy might help us in thinking through the openness or public nature of human togetherness.

An alternative approach to educational research in the field of community building could conceptualize educational practices as experiments in living with others. It could see practices as spaces where we experiment with relations to others. These are spaces where community can take form in new ways, without being a model. It is a space for relating to others without model. Educational research then is not about knowing and evaluating the realization of some community ideal, but starts from an attitude of not knowing. Research starts when we do no longer know what the good community is or should be. This attitude leads towards a focus on the concrete material reality taking shape in educational practices. These concrete practices can show us what being in community can mean. The concreteness challenges fixed community ideals and show new forms of relating that were not predictable. Educational research shows how new things happen that open our community ideals and enlarge the space of the possible relations and possible ways of being with others.

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