

# Reconnecting School and Society: Defending the School as a Public Institution

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*In this essay I reflect on the relationship between ‘school’ and ‘society.’ I do this from the angle of the idea of education as a public good, that is a ‘good’ that should serve ‘the public’ at large, and not just the private interests of some groups or individuals. While there are many countries in which the basic idea of education as a public good is accepted, there is a risk that the ‘right to education’ is exclusively understood in functional terms, where the school has to ‘give’ what society ‘asks’ of it. While this is a legitimate way in which the relationship between school and society can be understood and enacted, it is not the only way. In addition to the idea of the school as a function of and for society, I make a case that the school should also be understood as an institution, and that the task of institutions is to care and protect rather than to perform. It is only if there is a meaningful balance between the school as function and the school as institution, so I will argue, that the school can really be—and remain—a public good. I exemplify what this means by exploring the educational significance of the curriculum.*

## Introduction

Questions about the relationship between “school”<sup>1</sup> and “society”—that is, about what this relationship is, what it *might be*, what it *should be*, and *in whose interests* it functions—are not new. Already in 1899, John Dewey published three lectures on the topic under the illuminating title *The School and Society* (Dewey, 1899). In Dewey’s work we can find a case for the school as an “embryonic society.” Such a configuration of the school is important, Dewey argues, so that the school can play a role in the maintenance and renewal of democratic life. This is a theme Dewey would develop further in later publications, most famously in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916), yet with more depth and detail in *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey, 1927; see also Biesta, 2016a). Dewey is not the first to put the question of the relationship between the school and society on the scholarly and political agenda. An earlier important contribution was made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his book *Emile, or On Education* from 1762. If Dewey

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay I will use the word “school” as shorthand for schools, colleges, universities and other educational provision, including adult education. I exclude the “field” of lifelong learning from this, as I tend to think of this as a governmental technology rather than a form of educational provision (see Biesta, 2006, 2012; Simons & Masschelein 2008).

was trying to keep the school open to society, Rousseau comes from the opposite end. He has grave doubts about the educative quality of society and therefore makes the case that education needs to offer the child a degree of protection from societal forces that undermine their opportunities for leading their own life and leading it well (see Rousseau, 1762/1979).

More recently the French education scholar Philippe Meirieu has made a similar case with his argument that education is not just there to give what everyone wants from it, but also has a “duty to resist,” as he calls it (Meirieu, 2007). This duty not only is important at the micro-level of educational interactions, where it is neither wise nor helpful to just give children everything they want or desire. It is also important at the macro-level of the relationship between education and society. Here Meirieu particularly highlights the fact that modern societies not only push many desires in the direction of the school—think of the ever-increasing list of agenda’s for education, for example in relation to the promotion of health, wellbeing, social cohesion, democracy, sustainability, equality, and social justice—but also have many impossible or “immature” desires about the school. These, as Meirieu explains, are desires which the school simply cannot fulfil on its own—think, for example, of the question of (in)equality—or which actually undermine the very point of education (see below). Faced with such desires there is also a “duty to resist” and, to put it simply, to “stand up for education” (see Biesta & Säfström, 2011).

If schools were already under pressure in 2007 when Meirieu published his text, it is clear that in many countries this pressure has only increased and intensified. The rise of the global education measurement industry (Biesta, 2015) is one important factor in this development. After all, the comparative ranking of countries and their education systems creates a “permanent panic” by suggesting that some systems are better than others, that some systems are “at the top” and others “at the bottom,” and that almost everyone needs to “up their game.” In addition to such global pressures, countries themselves are also expecting more and more from education and are becoming more directive in setting agenda’s and performance targets for their schools, colleges and universities. Of course, these developments are not the result of bad intentions. Almost everyone in education—from politicians and policy makers to school principals and teachers—seems to be motivated by making education “better.” But what counts as “better,” and what it might take to get there, remains heavily contested.

In this essay I wish to offer some reflections on the relationship between “school” and “society.” I do this from the angle of the idea of education as a public good, that is a “good” that should serve “the public” at large, and not just the private interests of some groups or individuals. While there are many countries in which the basic idea of education as a public good is accepted, and while this idea also is supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, art. 23), the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959, art. 7), and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, art. 28), there is a risk that the “right to education” is exclusively understood in functional terms, where the school has to “give” what society or groups within society “asks” of it. While this is a legitimate way in which the relationship between school and society can be understood and enacted, the point I seek to make in this essay is that it is not the *only* way. In addition to the idea of the school as a function of and for society, I will make a case that the school should *also* be understood as an institution, and that the task of institutions is *to care and protect* rather than *to perform*, to put it briefly. It is only if there is a meaningful balance between the school as function and the school as institution, so I will argue, that the school can really be—and remain—a public good.

The key conceptual device I will utilise in this essay is the distinction between the school as (a) social function and the school as (an) institution. In the sociological literature on institutions this distinction is not always explicitly made. Scott, for example, defines institutions as “social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience [and] are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 1995, p. 33). Whereas some of such social structures have emerged or have been developed in order to “alleviate the lifeworld”—to use the vocabulary of Jürgen Habermas (1987)—of certain tasks, other social structures have emerged or have been developed in order to take care of

particular human “concerns.” There are, therefore, social structures that stand in a functional relationship to society, as their task is to perform distinct social tasks in more effective and efficient ways than when just left to individual actors in the lifeworld (think, for example, of defence or the fire brigade). But there are also social structures which have their own “concern” or own object of “care,” so to speak. Here we can think, for example, of legal institutions and their concern for justice or the health care system and its concern for health. Such institutions are not purely functional—or perhaps not functional at all—but could best be characterised as “principled” (see, for example, Walzer, 1983).

In this essay I will argue that the modern school stands in a double history and, as a result, is both a function of and for society *and* an institution with its own “principle” and object of care. Rather than arguing that the school should become a pure function or a pure institution, the double history and double identity of the modern school not only help to understand the particular pressures the modern school is under, but also show on what—principled—grounds the school has a duty to resist those functional demands and desires that run the risk of eroding or undermining the school’s institutional concern.

### **The Double History of the School (1): Function**

In order to grasp the point I seek to make in this essay, it is important to see that the modern school stands in what I will refer to as a “double history” (see also Biesta, 2022). The most well-known history of the modern school locates its origin in process of modernisation and, more specifically, the functional differentiation of modern societies. Whereas in pre-modern societies the whole of life took place in one common location—for example, in agricultural societies, the farm—so that the new generation would pick up everything they needed for their future life as farmer by simply taking part in everyday life, modernisation sees the emergence of different societal spheres and subsystems. Work, for example, moves from the home to factories and offices, and bartering transforms into a monetary economic system. In this history the school emerges as one of the functional sub-systems of society tasked with providing the new generation what they no longer can pick up organically by just “hanging around,” so to speak.

In this history, the school is a function *of* society (that is, a functional sub-system) which performs important functions *for* society. In more plain language we can say that as a function of society the school has important “jobs” to do for society, which is the reason why society provides public funds to the school. In this history society also has legitimate expectations towards the school and the right to check whether the school is doing its jobs well. In this history the relationship between school and society is one which focuses on the question what kind of school society needs. Whereas the functional “configuration” of the school is legitimate, it is not without problems, and many of these problems have become prominent in our time.

One problem arises when the list of jobs that society wants the school to do keeps getting longer and longer. Another problem arises when the jobs that society wants the school to do become increasingly “privatised,” that is, focused on the interests of particular groups or individuals, rather than orientated towards the common good. This particularly happens when the relationships between the school and its “stakeholders” is redefined in market-terms, where students and their parents become customers, and schools are pushed to provide what their customers want, irrespective of whether these wants are meaningful or not (see, for example, Hogan & Thompson, 2020). The functional configuration of the school also becomes distorted when accountability becomes managerial and when quasi-governmental organisations step in to “control” the “quality” of education (see the still very relevant study by Sharon Gewirtz, 2003). A final distortion has to do with what Jürgen Habermas has called the colonisation of the lifeworld by systems (Habermas, 1987). This happens when systems that were supposed to alleviate the lifeworld—the idea of functional differentiation and the development of functional subsystems—begin to interfere with the lifeworld.

These developments—or distortions—of the functional configuration of the school are problematic because they undermine and erode the ways in which the school can actually serve society and be functional for society. And we know all too well that these developments, particularly the culture of inspection and control and the relentless pressure on performance, also undermine and erode teachers (see, for example, Cooper & Travers, 2012).

## The Double History of the School (2): Institution

Although the functional history of the modern school is the most prominent and most visible account of the modern school's development, there is another history of the modern school which is also relevant and, as I will argue, as legitimate as the functional history. Here the school is seen as an “intermediary realm” between “home” and “the street,” that is, between the life of the family and the life in society (see, for example, Arendt, 1961/1977). Children, after all, need to leave their home in order to go to school. Yet school is not real life, it is not work, but is a place and space where the new generation gets time and opportunities to try things out. The school as a practicing ground, so we might say, in which things do not have to be perfect.

For this history of the school, it is very helpful that the Greek word *scholē* (σχολή) actually means “free time.” This is not the superficial idea of free time as the time in which one can do what one wants to do. Far more seriously, it is time that has been made free for the new generation so that they can arrive in the world without immediately being overwhelmed by all the pushes and pulls of the world. It is a protective space, so we might say following Rousseau. And the protection that the space of the school offers is important in order to give the new generation a fair chance at their existence as subjects of their own life, and not as objects of forces from elsewhere. In this history, then, the school is not a function but an *institution*. Institutions are social configurations which are established in order to take care of important dimensions of human life and human (co-)existence. Institutions are there to serve the common good, that is, that which matters—or should matter—to everyone, and is not just the preference of particular individuals or groups. Health is an example of such a common concern, as is justice, as it would be quite difficult to see health or justice just as the particular preferences of (some) individuals or groups. The role of institutions is not to do jobs for “others” but to care for common goods, which also involves offering protection when such goods are under pressure.

As institution, the school stands in a different relationship with society than as a function. Its task here is to protect the new generation from the forces that deny them a fair chance at their existence as subjects of their own life, which is as much a challenge in our times—think, for example, of the influence of so-called “social media”—as it was in the time of Rousseau. Here, the question is not what kind of school society needs, but rather what kind of society the school needs (Liebau, 1999), so that it can be this protective space and time—time we set free for the sake of the free life of the new generation.

Just as the functional history of the school has its distortions, there are also distortions with regard to the history of the school as institution. One distortion takes place when the protective space of the school turns its back against society, and assumes that if we just let children grow and develop everything will be “fine.” Extreme forms of such romantic ideas of child-centred education, as Oelkers (2005) has shown in his critical discussion of progressive education, fail to prepare the new generation properly for their life in society and therefore do more damage than good. Another distortion of the institutional configuration of the school happens when the protective space of the school becomes as space of indoctrination and control—which is, for example, what happened in Nazi Germany. The institutional configuration of the school is also undermined when the space for the student to appear in the educational process—for the student to have a voice, a say, a role and a presence in education—is seen as a problem that needs to be solved rather than being understood as a “beautiful risk” (Biesta, 2014) that is essential for education worthy of the name.

## A Servant of Two Masters

I wish to argue that the modern school stands in this double history—the functional history in which the school has jobs to do for society and the institutional history in which the school needs to offer protection for the sake of the free life of the new generation. One could say, with the words of the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni, that the modern school is a “servant of two masters.” It is important to see that both configurations of the modern school are legitimate, so it is not as if there is a need to choose for one or the other. Yet the challenge is to keep the two configurations in a meaningful balance. And this has become increasingly difficult in our time, because of the pressure coming from the side or “logic” of the functional configuration of the modern school. It is not just the insatiable desire from society to burden the school with more and more expectations, more jobs to do and more problems to solve (particularly the problems that society is unable or unwilling to solve itself; on this see Biesta, 2020). It is also the dominance of the idea that the school is just a function, just a “docile servant,” with no concern of itself.

If the idea of the double history of the modern school and its two configurations—a functional and an institutional one—makes sense, then one could argue that it is the responsibility of the state to provide support for *both* configurations. Yet, what has happened in many countries over the past decades, is that governments have “forgotten” their responsibility towards the school as institution, and have themselves increased the pressure on schools to “perform” and give society not just what it needs but actually what it wants or desires. This could well be the main problem of neo-liberal educational governance in which governments are increasingly demanding all kinds of things from education, particularly high performance on league tables (see, for example, Alexander, 2012; Crome, 2022; d’Agnese, 2017). Along these lines, neo-liberal governance has become a major factor in the disbalance between the functional and the institutional configuration of the modern school.

What also has not been particularly helpful, is that contemporary societies have increasingly becomes what Paul Roberts has referred to as “impulse societies” (see Roberts, 2014). In his 2014 book *The Impulse Society* Roberts asks the question—captured in the subtitle of the English edition of the book —“What is wrong with getting what we want?” And what he shows, through rich examples and penetrating analysis, is everything that goes wrong when we conduct our collective lives on the basis of the principle of “getting what we want,” instead of taking time to ponder whether what we want is actually what we *need*. And this is not just about what individuals or groups actually want. Roberts also shows how capitalist economies are constantly pushing new wants and desires in our direction, in the hope that we fall for them, even if we do not really need them.

One “good” example of this, is the business model of Apple, as it could be argued that Apple does not actually sell mobile phones, but what they really sell—very effectively—is the desire for a *new* mobile phone, ideally the latest Apple model. They “sell” this desire for free, through clever advertising and marketing, yet once this desire has arrived—often via the “back door,” so to speak—many will be ready to have over their hard-earned money for the latest model. And quite often the money has not yet even been earned, but is borrowed through financing schemes that are part of the overarching “package of seduction.” Yet, whether we really need this new model is a question Apple prefers not to raise or help us with. A similar logic is at stake in populist politics, in which politicians will often try to seduce voters by telling them that if they vote for them, they will be given everything they want. More often than not, such promises turn out to be empty—but only once the politicians are voted in.

I wish to argue that Roberts actually provides us with an *educational* analysis and critique of contemporary society, because he shows that in the impulse society we have ended up with economic and political systems that simply want us to run behind and fall for “our” desires, rather than that we raise the question whether what offers itself to us as a desire is worth desiring. Yet this question is a critical and fundamental educational question. As Philippe Meirieu has put it, forcefully and succinctly: “All education entails the difficult work of helping children to disconnect themselves from the logic of

desires” (see Meirieu, 2008, p. 13).<sup>2</sup> This work, as Meirieu argues, is not about telling children what they should and should not desire, and even less about using praise and punishment to suppress and channel their desires. On the contrary, it is about trying to make the question whether what can be desired is worth desiring into a living question in the lives of children and young people—a question they are willing to carry with them and are willing to keep raising throughout their lives.

This is, of course, hard work, particularly in an environment which, as mentioned, constantly pushes and seduces us to desire more without offering much help in pondering whether what can be desired is worth pursuing. Meirieu also highlights that raising this question for oneself is really hard work. That is why he argues for the need of “social configurations” (Meirieu, 2008) to help each other to come into a relationship with everything that can be desired, rather than simply be “consumed” by all desires that surround us. This, to make the point one more time, is not in order to get rid of all desires, because desires are an important “driving force” for our actions—think, for example, about the desire for peace or social justice. The task, therefore, is to figure out—individually and collectively—which desires are worthwhile and which are not.

The social configurations Meirieu is referring to are, of course, institutions, that is, configurations where we take care of what matters in our individual and collective lives. Roberts shows, however, that in the impulse society institutions such as journalism, public radio and television, libraries, and also schools, have increasingly been incorporated into the logic of the impulse society. We can see this in the way in which viewing figures have eroded public broadcasting, but also in the way in which school rankings have eroded public education. The dynamics of the impulse society are therefore another contributing factor to the disbalance between the school as function and the school as institution. Or put more explicitly: these dynamics have contributed significantly to the forgetting that the school is not just a functional sub-system.

## Taking Care of the Educational Question

Before I present some suggestions for how we might begin to restore the balance between the functional and institutional configuration of the modern school, particular at the level of our educational practices, I wish to look briefly at what it might mean to take Meirieu’s educational question seriously in our educational endeavours. For this I turn to the work of the German education scholar Dietrich Benner. In a fascinating passage in his book *Allgemeine Pädagogik*, Benner (2015) asks whether education matters, that is, whether the work of parents, teachers, and other educators makes a difference for the one being educated. He approaches this question in the context of the nature-nurture debate, and asks what the relative contribution of nature, nurture, and education to the formation of human beings might be. This seems to be an important question for educators, because if it turns out that our genetic make-up (nature) would account for, say, 75%, and the influence from the environment (nurture) for, say, 20%, then there is very little scope left for education to make a difference.

While one might expect that Benner, as an eminent professor of education, would try to make the case for a rather large contribution of education vis-à-vis the influences from nature and nurture, he comes with the remarkable suggestion that irrespective of what percentage one would claim for nature on the one hand and nurture on the other, together “these always add up to 100%” (see Benner, 2015, p. 73). Yet rather than reading this as an argument for giving up on education altogether, Benner pursues a different line by arguing that the educational question—and hence the orientation of the educational work of parents and teachers—is actually of an entirely *different order*. An order that is not “bio-neuro-socio-cultural,” to use my own words, but thoroughly *existential*.

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<sup>2</sup>In French: “Toute la pédagogie est un travail compliqué ... pour aider l'enfant à se dégager de la logique du caprice.”

Education, so Benner suggests, is not about the ways individuals are shaped from the inside-out, that is as a result of the development of their genetic make-up and biological constitution; nor is it about how individuals are shaped from the outside-in, so to speak, that is, as a result of influences from the environment. This is not because these processes do not happen, but because education is interested in an altogether *different* question, namely the question how human beings, as individuals, *exist*, that is, how they try to lead their own life, make choices, say “yes” to some opportunities and “no” to others, get out of bed in the morning or have a lie in, fall in love, are faced with illness, grow old, feel joy and guilt, and so on. Put simply, the educational question is about what individuals will do with how they have become, with how they have developed, with what they have learned, with their abilities and competencies, but also with their blind spots and incompetencies, as it is out of that “mix” that human beings need to live their own life.

If the question of nature and nurture is about the way in which the human organism grows, both as a result of “internal” biological processes and influences from the outside—development and learning, we might say (see also Böhm, 2016, p. 169)—the educational question, to put it briefly but accurately, is about how an “I” can be called forward from this mix. Benner has suggested the very helpful phrase “Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit” to capture the essence of the educational work. This literally translates as “summoning to self-action.” It is important to see, however, that this summoning is not the injunction to be *yourself* and even less so the summoning just to become active. It rather is the injunction to be *a self*, to be an “I,” to not forget oneself or let oneself just be led by forces and desires from “elsewhere.”

With a simple but, in my view, helpful image, we could say that in education we knock on the “door” of our students and ask “Is anyone there?” This is indeed a summoning, alerting our students to the possibility to exist as a self, to exist as a subject of one’s own life, because ultimately and fundamentally the “I” is the work of the self, as another German scholar, Winfried Böhm has put it (see Böhm, 1997, p. 199). The most we can do is open a space for our students to step into, so to speak, but the step will have to be *their* step if, that is, we are interested in their freedom. It is important to highlight that the question of the “I” is not the question of identity. It is not the question *who* the student is—albeit that this can be an important question as well—but it is the question *how* the student is, what the student will do with their identity, their knowledge, and so on, particularly when it matters—which, more often than not, is not in our own hands but has to do with what crosses our life path. This is about how the student tries to exist as subject of their own life, not as object of external forces and desires, to make the point one more time. As institution, this is the school’s main and central concern, its main and central “object” of care.

### **Restoring the Balance, Reclaiming the Curriculum**

There are many ways in which the balance between the functional and the institutional configuration of the modern school can and should be restored. The critique of neo-liberalism in education is an important and ongoing part of such work, as is the attempt—which is central to the work in the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy at Maynooth University in Ireland—to explore democratic possibilities and a “new publicness” after and “beyond” this critique (see Säfström & Biesta, 2023). I wish to conclude this essay with some reflections on the importance and significance of the curriculum with regard to this task.

One reason for this focus has to do with the fact that while I believe that the “knock” on the student’s “door” is absolutely essential if, as educators, we are interested in the possibility for our students to exist as subjects of their own life, it can quickly become problematic if the teacher is the one who constantly performs this knock (for a detailed discussion, see Saeverot et al., in press). In addition to the fact that this can become quite uncomfortable, both for students and for teachers, and thus could become counter-productive, it also carries the risk that it slides back into “old” forms of moral and moralising education, or at least is being perceived as such by students, and most likely also by teachers. It is therefore much more meaningful if the “knock,” that is, the appeal to the student, comes from “elsewhere,” so we

might say. It is much more meaningful, therefore, if students can encounter this appeal, this question “Is anyone there?,” in the curriculum.

Now here we encounter another problem, because over the past decades the curriculum has almost entirely been brought into the functional configuration of the modern school. In many cases, the curriculum has transformed into a list of “learning outcomes” for students to achieve, increasingly through regimes of self-regulated learning rather than meaningful teaching. In such a setup, it is the “outcome” that matters, for individual students but also for assessment and inspection regimes, but the question how an “outcome” is achieved and what the quality of the educational trajectory towards the “outcome” has been, has been declared irrelevant. As long as the interventions are “effective” for producing the outcome, so this logic of schooling goes, things are fine, which also explains how much within the functional history of the modern school the focus of research has turned to questions of effectiveness. It seems as if the only relevant question in education is the question as to “what works”—a functional questions—but what something should work *for* and how something should be made to work, has mainly disappeared from the radar (see, for example, Biesta, 2016b).

That is why it is important to reclaim the importance of the curriculum, not, however, as a list of outcomes-to-be-achieved but, in its more literal meaning, as a “course of study.” In this understanding, the curriculum is the trajectory we design for our students so that they can encounter meaningful content, experiences, tasks, explorations, and adventures that are meaningful for their educational journey. In some cases, it is pretty clear where this journey should lead to. We can say with a significant degree of precision and concreteness what a good car mechanic should know and be able to do. But often the more significant educational journeys are open-ended, not so that anything is possible, but so that there is room for the student and everything is not already pre-programmed and pre-defined. With regard to this way of grasping what a curriculum is and ought to be—a course of study, the temporal organisation of education, a trajectory for our students—there is an insight from the German curriculum-scholar Wolfgang Klafki which is highly relevant.

In his work on curriculum, he makes an important distinction between what, in German, is called *Bildungsinhalt* and *Bildungsgehalt* (see Klafki, 1964, 2000). *Inhalt*, which literally translates as “content” is indeed the content that we put on the “table” of our students as part of the curricular trajectories we design for them. Yet Klafki’s point is that education can never just be about students getting this content in their memory for reproduction at a later point in time. The content we present to our students also needs to have educative quality, which is one way to understand the German idea of *Bildungsgehalt*. The content needs to have “appeal”-quality, that is, the ability to knock on the students’ door and raise the question where they are in relation to this content. It is, after all, one thing to know physics or chemistry or history or mathematics, but still a further question what moral and political obligations and responsibilities follow from “having” such knowledge and understanding. What matters here is whether in the curriculum students can encounter the world as question—as a question for them—or whether they will only encounter the world as a list of tasks on which they need to perform (on this, see also Biesta, 2022). As Klafki has put it, the point of the curriculum is not just to disclose the world to the student but, in one and the same “move,” to disclose the student to the world. And for this the educative quality of what students encounter matters.

## Concluding Comments

In this essay I have offered reflections on the relationship between “school” and “society.” I have done so by pointing out that the modern school stands in a “double history.” In one history the modern school is configured as a function of and for society. Here, as I have argued, the school has important work to do in response to societal needs. While this is a legitimate configuration, I have highlighted that there is a second configuration where the school appears as institution. Here the task of the school is not to perform and be in service of society, but rather to care for the possibilities for the new generation to be

able to exist as subject of their own life—which has become even more of a challenge under the conditions of the “impulse society.” Central in the considerations I have presented in this essay is the idea of education as a public good.

The point I have tried to make is that when we begin to redefine the idea of the public good in purely functional terms—the public good as what the public “wants” from education—and no longer connect it to the importance of institutions as social configuration taking care of a common good that is not reducible to the interest of private parties or the market, we end up undermining the importance of the school as public institution. That is why the two histories of the modern school matter and why the configurations of the modern school—as function and institution—also matter. These configurations do not present us with a choice, but rather with the ongoing challenge to maintain a meaningful balance between the two. This is hard work, not least because in our time the functional understanding of the school has become almost hegemonic. That is why a defence of the school as institution remains important. That this is not just a matter of abstract ideals, is something I have tried to show by arguing for the importance of the curriculum as the meeting place of the functional and the institutional configuration of the modern school.

Finally: in the title of this essay I have used the word “defence” because I do think that the institutional configuration of the modern school is under severe pressure from its functional twin and because governments in many countries have forgotten their “duty of care” for *both* configurations and have ended up (almost) entirely on the functional end of the spectrum with their attempts to steer education systems towards particular “outcomes.” Philippe Meirieu’s “duty to resist” is not meant as a call to engage in a battle over which agenda and whose values should determine the jobs that the school as function should perform. It rather is the call to resist any development that “forgets” or pushes out the institutional side of the modern school; any attempt, in other words, to conveniently forget that the school is not simply a machine that needs to become perfect (see Biesta, 2020), but an institution that needs to offer care and protection so that the new generation gets a fair chance at their existence as subject of their own life.

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