

Editorial: Being Alone Together in Education

At the time of writing, people around the world are becoming more acquainted with solitude, as a result of a pandemic to which governments have responded with policies that isolate people or households. Education is more solitary too, with schools and universities closed in many countries. Is this new? In troubled times throughout history, people have been separated and have had to live and learn in solitude or in families without institutional support. And even in good times, people have learned more in households, from family and on their own, in the first few years of life than they learn in the rest of their lives in formal education and work. This special edition of *Paedagogia Christiana* explores some of the many ways in which aloneness (solitude, silence and loneliness) interacts with formal and informal education throughout our lives. There are ‘good’ and ‘bad’, pleasurable and painful, forms of aloneness, and they can, in many different ways, provide opportunities for learning, just as they can limit or block learning. This special edition of *Paedagogia Christiana* brings together scholarship on solitude, silence and loneliness and their relationship to learning across the lifespan.

The editors of this special issue met several years ago, having realised that we had both researched and written books on solitude and education. To each of us, separately, this seemed like a small, niche, area of research. And yet when we organised the first symposium on the subject, we found interest from around the world and from a very wide range of academic disciplines. This publication is one of the fruits of that symposium. Notwithstanding

the varied interests and disciplines of those who took part, a principle was agreed by the organisers that this should not simply promote solitude and denigrate communality. We were interested in the various forms of aloneness that can be experienced within, as well as outside, communities. Hence the symposium's title: *Alone Together: An International Pandisciplinary Symposium on Solitude in Community*. The phrase 'alone together' was taken from the writings of the Scottish philosopher of community, John Macmurray. Writing in 1956, he said:

[W]e can be ourselves only in relation to our fellows. Personal relations, moreover, are necessarily direct. We cannot be related personally to people we do not know. We must meet; we must communicate with one another; we must, it would seem, be alone together. (Macmurray, p. 169)

That is, we need other people not least so we can be alone. The psychologist Winnicott said something similar, just two years later in 1958: 'The basis of the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present' (Winnicott, 2017, p. 243). That is one of the earliest development features of babies and, as Galanaki says, 'a major sign of emotional maturity' that 'enables the child to simply exist without having to react to external stimuli or act with a purpose'. '[O]nly in this way', she continues, 'can the child discover his or her own personal life – that is, his or her true self' (Galanaki, 2005, p. 129).

Learning is so often done alone, together. I read a book, at home or in school or university, and am absorbed in the book even as other people are around me; I am swallowed up by a Rembrandt self-portrait in the middle of a busy gallery; the ecstatic sadness of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* transforms my understanding, just my understanding, in a hall amongst hundreds of listeners. Even as we learn from another person – a novelist, an artist, a composer – from hundreds of years ago, we may be learning in solitude, however many people we are with. It is easy to mistake the personal and relational character of learning with the need to listen to the teacher, or the need to keep our heads down focusing on a specific task. The obsession with everyone being 'on task' all the time in schools led one educationist to complain:

So often when a child looks out the window, we say she's off task. ... Well, she may be on the biggest task of her life. (Noddings, quoted in Kessler, 2000, p. 41)

We would therefore like to commend to you the articles in this issue, each in its own way an exploration of how we might understand the educational significance of aloneness.

Two philosophical accounts, from Christophe Perrin and from Piotr Domeracki, describe how solitude has been understood historically, as a feature – for some, the dominant feature – of human life. Whereas Perrin notes that we may learn more about solitude from imaginative literature than from professional philosophy, Domeracki finds the strands of philosophy that seem to leave us fundamentally alone and proposes a monoseological discourse on the dialectic of solitude and community. The counselling psychologist Richard Cleveland describes the positive value of solitude and one of its most popular contemporary manifestations in the practice of mindfulness. Teresa Olearczyk, as an educationalist, writes of the positive influence of silence on personality development. Learning in solitude is well-represented by the research of Katarzyna Wrońska, an educationalist and philosopher, who describes a history of self-instruction in Poland, whilst the negative impact of loneliness is described by social pedagogist Barbara Chojnacka, in her work on children who have caring responsibilities for members of their own families. Young people may *choose* solitude, of course. Sandra Bosacki gives a psychologist's account of how adolescents may use silence in good – and sometimes in not-so-good – ways during this crucial period of their development. Anyone who has met an adolescent will be familiar with the creative use of silence.

It is good to pause for a story. The storyteller and researcher of storytelling, Catherine Heinemeyer, captures all the mystery of a story and of how we understand solitude in and from stories. Learning is rarely so entrancing.

Joanna Król in her history of education tells of the paradox of young people within a politically oppressive regime being pushed into solitudinous creativity. This has echoes of Graham Greene's cynical Harry Lime, in *The Third Man*, who said:

In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed – but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock. (Greene and Reed, 1949)

This is hardly an advert for oppression: it is, rather, a note on how oppressive regimes tend to separate people, creating all kinds of damaging forms of solitude – which, as a result of people's capacities to be alone, whilst together,

can also trigger a burst of creativity. Religions, too, bring people together. As a theologian, Gillian Simpson's personal account of her learning religion takes us into the community, out of the community, and back in again – aloneness and togetherness in a fascinating lifelong dance. And just as oppression may paradoxically stimulate creativity, caring for people may just as paradoxically create loneliness. Magdalena Leszko, Rafał Iwański and Beata Bugajska write of the loneliness of caregivers, as does Piotr Krakowiak. Both these strands of research provide hope, too, and ways of learning from these situations. A harder experience is described for prisoners, in Aneta Jarzębińska's article on the effects of being taken away from one's family. This is a similar experience to that of the great Roman writer, Ovid, whose exile for the last decade of his life is eloquently analysed by Olga Szykaruk. Ovid is one of Perrin's key authors, and in such ways these articles – written in solitude – manage to speak to each other. Our final article is Aleksander Cywiński's account of how countries, as much as people, may experience solitude or loneliness – self-imposed isolation, or rejection by other countries – which in turn affects our individual experiences of solitude and togetherness.

The creation of this special issue of *Paedagogia Christiana* has itself been an experience of bringing people together from many countries, and from many disciplines, to speak with distinctive voices on how we learn alone, together. All the editors and authors would welcome correspondence from readers on a topic that clearly fires the imagination.

*Julian Stern and Małgorzata Walejko
York and Szczecin, March 2020*

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