

## Chapter 2

# Valorising the Cultural Heritage of the School Desk Through Historical Research

Marc Depaepe, Frank Simon, and Pieter Verstraete

It is not hard to prove that the subject of the Research Community meeting in 2012 is a hot topic within the international network of historians of education. The fact that both the *Sektion Historische Bildungsforschung in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft* and the British *History of Education Society* organised their annual conference about this subject in 2009 speaks for itself. Although there are variations in emphasis between the cultural and social aspects of educational objects the subtitle of the German congress (Priem et al. 2012) on the one hand and the place and the scope in which that materiality is expressed, and the focus of the British organisers (Burke et al. 2010) on the other hand, both approaches are in line with the objectives of the Leuven conference.

From a historical point of view, not only is it possible for an innovative approach to be adapted to the way the material culture and representation of educational research are examined, but the historical study itself can also contribute to a revamping of the material scholarly culture and the way it is represented. The latter can be brought about both by means of research projects being set up with an intrinsic finality, and via projects contemplating an alternative way of disseminating and communicating scientific findings. In our paper we want to substantiate this thesis based on the example of the school desk which we deal with at various ‘levels’ of historiography.

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M. Depaepe (✉)

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Campus Kortrijk, Sabbelaan 53, 8500 Kortrijk, Belgium  
e-mail: Marc.Depaepe@kuleuven-kulak.be

F. Simon

Ghent University, Gent, Belgium  
e-mail: frank.simon@ugent.be

P. Verstraete

Centre for the History of Education, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Kortrijk, Belgium  
e-mail: Pieter.Verstraete@ped.kuleuven.be

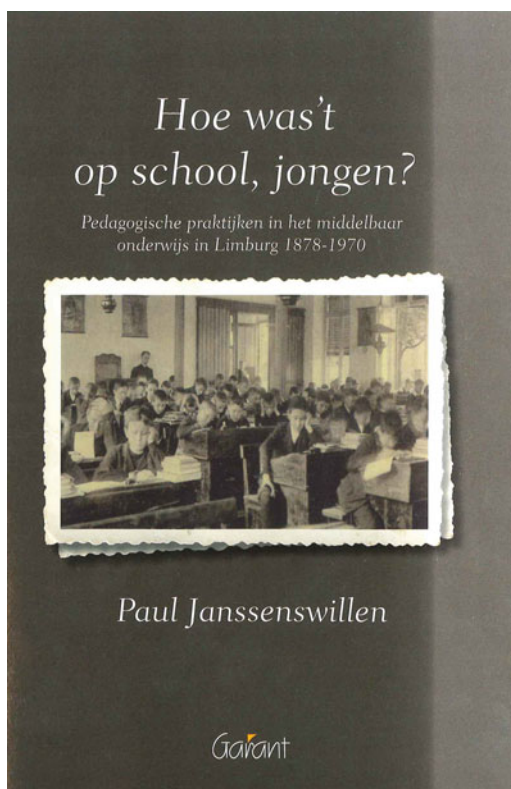
## 2.1 The School Desk as an Icon of and Metaphor for Educational Practices

In the material culture of educational research the school desk is distinctly in evidence as a metaphor for and icon of educational practices. Proof of this can be found in photos and illustrations on the covers of scholarly publications, the use of the word in titles, slogans, and so on. In the Netherlands a popular website (with 4,700,000 members, according to their own figures) has even been named after the school desk ([www.schoolbank.nl](http://www.schoolbank.nl)). It enables people to search for old schoolmates from the same class. It is obvious that such references have an historical dimension. Book covers for example often use ‘historical’ images that have in fact been extracted from their context and, on being appropriated in this way, actually end up recalling little of that specific past to which they belong, even if they are used for research into the history of education.

There is no lack of examples of this, both within and outside of the historiography of education. If one peruses the history of education in Flanders and the Netherlands it is possible to find several attractive covers with illustrations of school desks, but few (or even none of them) are actually featured in the account told in the book. Titles (literally translated) such as “What was it like at school? Teaching practices in secondary education in Limburg 1878–1970” (Jansenswillen 2009) (see Fig. 2.1); “200 years of poets, thinkers and dreamers” about the creation of the preparatory seminary in Roeselare (Strobbe 2006); “Student teachers between acts and ideals” about the education of teachers in the Netherlands (Van Essen 2006); “Utile Dulci. Learning and reading books for Dutch and Flemish youth” (Bakker et al. 2007); “From convent school to primary school. A historical overview of education in the Netherlands” (Stilma 1995/2002<sup>3</sup>); “Montessori in fascist Italy” (Leenders 1999); “Going to school in times of war. Everyday life during the occupation” (Van de Wijngaert 1988), and “More knowledge, greater opportunity” (Dasberg and Jansing 1978), all make it clear that the school desk iconography on book covers is meant much more as a metaphor for going to school than what they were actually used for. These illustrations, often chosen to sell better, do not refer to the act of teaching in the classroom, either through the school desk or not. That is also the case with the textual metaphor in the title of the work by Jan Briffaerts (2007) “If the Congo wants to sit at school desks”, that tries to give a central role to the micro situation of education in the colony.

By way of comparison with more general studies in education that do not aim at direct historical analyses of teaching and learning processes, we refer among others to the Dutch translation of the classic of Edgar Faure et al. (1974), “Learning to live”... where a child at a school desk also serves as the sign for the school. With a little good will one can sum up the lectern that appears on the cover of “Thinking again” (Blake et al. 1998)—to quote our colleagues in educational philosophy—as a sort of school desk. Even if this is possible, which is far-fetched, it illustrates the need of the authors (or is it a kind of fashion?) to grasp at un-modern prints from the

**Fig. 2.1** Cover of the book  
by P. Janssenswillen (2009)



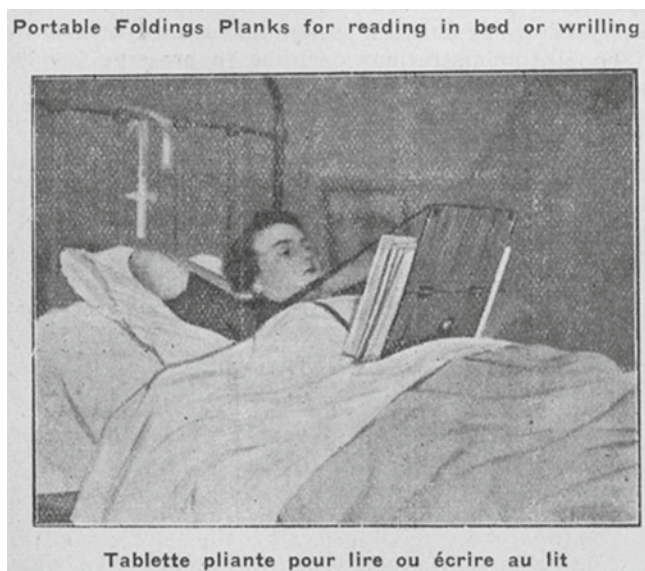
far distant past to refer to modern-day problems. The proof of this is, among others, the artificial construction of a cover featuring a school desk for one of the most recent issues of the trade union magazine *Basis* (20 October 2012). A cover is for historic researchers far from being of little importance as an artefact of the material culture of the past. Hence, that also applies to textbooks, which, just like the school desk itself, are part of the school culture that has established a sort of globalising regime of modernisation in Western society over the past 250 years. This regime is strikingly described by Tyack and Tobin (1994) as grammar of schooling with its own dynamic rules and laws. Less well known, but just as interesting are the ethno-historical analyses of Spanish researchers such as Antonio Viñao (2001), that, in our attempts to complement the grammar of schooling with teaching semantics, we have adopted in part as themes for building up a historical school theory (Depaepe et al. 2008). In order to ascertain the almost universal character of this grammar, a little tour of the website of the Alfa Project Patre Manes is useful. In the historical comparison of European and Latin-American textbooks, the cover, on the basis of our initiatives, plays a central role as a separate subject (see: [hum.unne.edu.ar/investigacion/educa/alfa/bib\\_virtual.htm](http://hum.unne.edu.ar/investigacion/educa/alfa/bib_virtual.htm)).

## 2.2 The Brodsky-Case as a Starting Point for Writing New Histories of the School Desk

But let us get back to the school desk. There are always comments to make about the research and hence about historical educational research into this subject. Clearly, historical research into the use of the school desk in education and teaching can help explain its iconic value for the present day (which is also revealed by the fact that virtually all school museums include displays of school desks). But this assumes another approach than a purely factual or antiquarian one, as well as an approach other than the modernistic account of progress as ‘the longer, the better’. The question as to when exactly the ‘desk’ was introduced is, therefore, by no means the most interesting issue for us here. What is of interest is the relationship linking the long tradition of use of the desk with the process of modernisation (from use in libraries and churches and then the monitorial education system, through to its use in simultaneous teaching—see, among others, the research projects undertaken by Caruso 2008, in which the idea of a Foucauldian ‘gaze’ plays a central role; for the Foucauldian ‘bio-political’ context, see his former work, Caruso 2003). Studies on the above mentioned ‘grammar of schooling’ and the ‘grammar of educationalization’, such as those that we have undertaken in the past, but which are also at the head of various other initiatives, constitute a good starting point for this.

In a recent article, for example, some of us have investigated how Oscar Brodsky (1859–1949)—a Jewish wholesale merchant born in the then Russian harbour city of Odessa—after arriving in Brussels in 1914, precisely operated as a school desk designer and how successful he was in it (Depaepe et al. 2012). This commercial dimension has remained, up to now, largely outside the attention of research in the history of education of school desks. At the basis of the underlying medical and hygienic discourses of the pedagogical opinion makers, shared by the designers, historians of education too quickly assume that the driving force for the commercialization of school desks was their contribution to the disciplining of the bodies of the pupils (see, e.g., Moreno Martinez 2006), the hygienization and medicalization of the eye, and the like. The German ophthalmologist Hermann Cohn, for example, explored already in the second half of the nineteenth century, relationships between myopia, scoliosis, school desks and other materialities of schooling, which created, of course, a possible link between the entrepreneurial discourses of the emerging school desk industry on the one hand and the scientific and medical discourses of the emerging studies in psycho-pedagogy, child-study, and developmental psychology on the other hand (see Dittrich 2009). We are concerned not so much with the disciplining or with the mechanistic image of the body but rather with the industrial standardization of the school desk itself (the cheap ‘*pret-à-porter*’) and the creative competition against it from the introduction of individualized (but also standardized) made-to-measure desk: deluxe *pret-à-porter* for the purposes of New Education (and most probably also sick and poor children, see Fig. 2.2).

On the basis of the sporadic data that we have been able to gather on Brodsky’s design of an individualized, foldable school desk, we must conclude however that this ‘invention’ was not immediately a success. Hardly any of Brodsky’s foldable school



**Fig. 2.2** Brodsky's portable folding planks for reading or writing in bed... (Brodsky-folder, c. 1938)

desks were ever sold as far as we know. The most intriguing and at the same time crucial question that arises here is, of course, why? What actually was this reason for this failure? Examples of 'successful' innovations of analogous didactic material seem to us to be a good starting point, for then we can determine precisely how the Brodsky case precisely differed from these success stories: (1) Was it due to the designer himself and the publicity campaign he conducted? (2) Did this campaign make use of another 'discourse'? (3) And because of this, did something go wrong with the marketing or the production? (4) Or did the greatest dissimilarities lie with the designed object itself and its attractiveness for the envisioned market or markets?

In our answer we have speculated on the last point: the specific characteristics of Brodsky's flexible school desk and its attractiveness or functionality for the potential education market. Irrespective of the simple fact that a portable desk weighing 4–5 k would be far too heavy for children (certainly part of the population that were categorised under 'school hygiene', such as children with tuberculosis, under-nourished children, etc.), the characteristics of the object probably also clashed with the cultural customs at home and at school of the time which made the integration difficult in both worlds. Moreover it was also possibly true that the simple cultural phenomenon of 'come in and sit down' existed in both worlds rather than 'look for a place for your foldable desk'. By playing with the possible differences between the culture at home and at school, we came up with a double thesis, the first concerning school practice and the second about what happens at home.

Probably, the so-called 'flexibility', more in particular 'foldability' of Brodsky's school desk, was a bridge too far for the dominant, traditional school praxis. It probably fits with the bombastic rhetoric of reform pedagogy, but that was primarily for

the gallery. Brodsky's flexibility did not fit in directly with the mental structures that existed in wide circles as regards the concept of 'school'. In this sense, they were presumably too 'modern' for the 'modern school', which had, in fact, remained a 'schoolish' school. Possibly, they did anticipate the evolution towards more individuality (and differentiation) in education, but for this the spirit of the time was not yet 'ripe'. From this point of view, Brodsky's designs for a foldable, portable school desk were, presumably, much too early. The individual desk may well seem to be ideal at the level of the 'discourse', but in practice one still preferred the clumsy, standardized, two-seater, which had replaced the long benches of the mutual education—reminiscent of the original church and library benches—in the course of the nineteenth century. To what could the introduction of 'more flexibility' in the mentality of the school staff at the time have served than in the prospect that the benches could thereby be more easily stacked up for cleaning the classrooms?—an argument, moreover, that had not escaped Brodsky himself! Just as the preference for an individualized school desk matched the perspective of increasing hygienization—in the context of modernization, the other was finally a 'rotting bacteria' that had to be avoided—this also matched the increasing privatization of the personal life. The problem was only that this kind of process had not penetrated the schoolish mentality as a revolution but rather as a slow evolution. In short, the innovation proposed by Brodsky was, in our opinion, too little schoolish for the school to be able to succeed.

Even more ironic, perhaps, is the second part of our thesis: the flexibility envisioned by Brodsky might have been too progressive for the conservative and conserving schoolish milieu, but probably it was precisely not progressive enough for the modernizing household. The school and office furniture he extolled, which could also serve outside the school to read, to write, was probably seen by the general public as being much too schoolish and thus also as too much separated from real life to have any chance of succeeding. Who would take a foldable school desk on a trip or to his home? The distance between 'school' and 'life'—which the Belgian reform pedagogues had tried to bridge by means of various designs of the 'school for life'—ultimately remained too great.

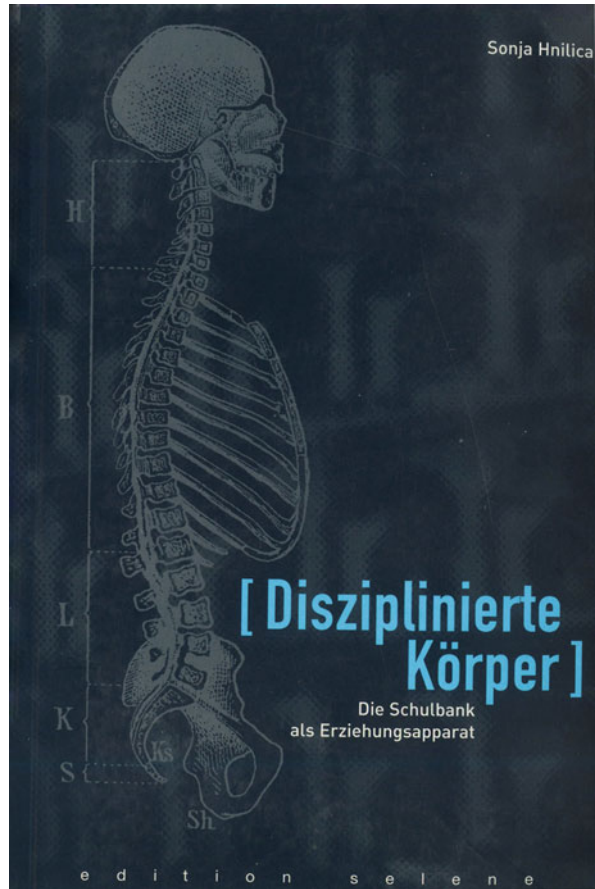
From the Brodsky example, it might be clear that historical artefacts and objects should, as such, no longer be regarded as the socially external world of the environment—i.e. purely subjects of the imposition of collective functions by human actors—but as 'mediating agencies' (cf. Actor-Network-Theory). Things 'come to life' in their organizational, social and cultural relationships and, as 'living' entities, they also intervene in these relationships.

## **2.3 The Weight of the Foucauldian Tradition in School Desk Historiography and Its Inconveniences**

The problem, however, is that such biographies of educational materialities have not been written yet. Rather than venturing into such a hybrid approach, present-day research still often sets its sights on one object, one phase of life or on only a few



**Fig. 2.3** Cover of the book by Hnilica (2003): a skeleton as outcome of the Foucauldian approach?



facets of the object (for example, design, symbolic value, underlying motives or use). In this approach, the object is not regarded as a ‘symptom’—being (able to be) everything simultaneously. The complex history of educational materialities is thus reduced to thematic accounts that are easy to digest, often using a highly descriptive style. Then there are the tight straitjackets that seem to constrain each of these authors. Certain frameworks that are placed on the past—‘medicalization’ and Foucault’s ‘disciplining concept’ to name the most important to which we already have referred earlier in this essay—are omnipresent and have been reworked numerous times, only to be confirmed time and again. A particularly good illustration is the publication entitled, *Disziplinierte Körper: Die Schulbank als Erziehungsapparat* (Hnilica 2003), in which Foucault has the first and last word, figuratively speaking (see Fig. 2.3). Likewise, we could demonstrate here that the designers of school desks held order and discipline in high esteem and that they moved within a scientific discourse. But there is more. It would therefore seem a good idea, in addition, to test some alternative paths.

Focusing on the ‘lifecycle’ of an object is one of these alternative paths. This biographical approach to objects can be found, for example, in *The Object in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. The authors, Olson et al. (2006), made a distinction between the ‘creation’, ‘the living object’ and ‘the after-life’ of the object, in this case works of art: “Taken as a whole, these phases highlight the processes that impel, impact or impede the dynamic trajectories of objects and inform historians about the cultures they enriched” (p. i). Since objects cannot tell their own biographies we have to put them together. We therefore take it as a challenge for the future to write the biography of the school desk, from intellectual property to thingamajig, subject of debate, factory article, shop item, showpiece at all kinds of conferences, museum piece, furniture in a pub, old junk in the attic, piece of furniture in the kid’s corner of a dress shop, second hand article for sale on the internet ([www.2dehands.be](http://www.2dehands.be)), or, ultimately... firewood.

It is of course striking that the use of the school desk in the course of this modernization has itself been the subject of ‘educationally’ oriented research, in particular in the context of school hygiene (at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century). This kind of research was aimed, among other things, at determining the ‘optimal’ distance between the pupil’s eyes and the surface of the desk, so as to optimise the conditions in which pupils learnt to read and write. This stimulated all kinds of practices that would be customary for a long time in the pedagogical regime. It was not only in twentieth century Belgium that many teacher walked around with a graduated ruler, which they regularly pushed under the chin of the pupils to check if the correct distance with the reading or writing sheet was complied with... (see, e.g., Cüppers and Weisgerber 1989, p. 61). Another didactic implication of the research (in this case ophthalmological) into school hygiene was that visually impaired pupils had to sit at the desk at the front of the class (which for that matter ran counter to the custom that had evolved *sui generis*, in churches and in school classrooms, whereby the most successful pupils were seated at the front of the class, echoes of which are still to be found to this day in sayings such as ‘*een bank vooruit*’ (literally, ‘one desk ahead’). Here also it seems, once again, that the authors of school histories—often former teachers—are not able to approach the classic element from collective educational memory in a creative and yet scientific manner. In the Flemish book whose main title was “One desk ahead” (Durnez 1989) this ancient educational practice of rewarding behaviour at school and knowledge did not mention this once, let alone contextualise it against the background of the self-developing meritocracy. Just the opposite in fact, the slogan, and the opening sentence, to which no further reference was made, only supports the rather folkloric approach with a large number of nostalgic references to a romanticised educational past, that can be seen in Europe in many amateur museums about education. As far as we know, the same applies also for that other, ancient (?) ‘pedagogical’ custom of the ‘donkey stool’ (whether or not in combination with having to wear donkey’s ears or a donkey’s cap and a donkey’s picture around one’s neck) to stigmatise pupils as stupid, lazy, and so on. The image of the donkey stool emerges in the literature again as part of the pedagogical iconography in photo books about the history of education (for example Meijsen 1976), as well as on the



cover of research about it, and as a metaphor in the title of the often strongly romanticised stories, memories of one's own educational biography and interviews on the subject (Vanderhaeghen 2011). A good example of such a stereotyping approach of the pedagogical past is, in any case, the very recent "Master, master, master!" (*Meester, meester, meester!*)—a compilation of 'teacher stories' of the old-days by Julien Van Remoortere (2012)—he himself a former teacher who wrote more than 300 books (such as touristic guides, and so on)... which had such nostalgic images of the past engraved in the collective memory; it is not difficult to prove that these are far away from the history of education research. Take for example the simple fact that in Belgium the number of female teachers already at the turn of the twentieth century exceeded the number of male teachers (Depaepe et al. 2006).

The problem with the history of education research of the school desk, however, is that it has in spite of the growing attention paid to the material culture, mainly been viewed until now as part of the intended Foucauldian disciplining and/or normalising paradigms at a more or less scientific level (see Moreno Martinez 2005). The school desk is summed up as an explicit part of the 'materialities of schooling', also given the privileged position of the icon on the cover. The consequences of this have in the meantime been twofold. Firstly the educational and teaching process (including research on it) took on a somewhat negative nuance (as a form of intervention that was mainly directed from the top down and targeted physical control of the pupils). The school desk appeared to be an 'excellent' tool for illustrating that disciplinary approach. This thought was even implicitly adopted in historical educational publications that did not want to follow this Foucauldian 'straightjacket' to the letter, but apparently viewed it as an important source of inspiration in order to elevate the scientific character of their report. The example that we have in front of us is the collection of texts by D'hoker and Tolleneer (1995) about the history of physical education in Belgium and the Netherlands. With the desk of Jacob Happel (1833–1916) at the back of their minds (Velle 1995, p. 116) they did not just present a series of stylised school desks on the cover of their book, but they also called it 'the forgotten body'. From the reasoning and facts stated in the book—the same Happel, a gymnastics teacher of German origin from Antwerp, brought an anti-masturbation school desk on the market—that title is rather cynical, of course. The health discourse about school hygiene, of which the school desk discussion was also part, concentrated on the body, after all. That did not prevent body issues from being suppressed and/or smoothed over in Catholic educational circles in Belgium and Flanders until deep in the twentieth century, to which the title of course refers.

But there is also a second consequence of the Foucauldian approach. Theories on discipline run the danger of presenting the role of civilising people (summarised as disciplining, medicalization, hygienization, etc.) as a passive intervention that overcame or was imposed on students. This resulted in the school desk primarily being conceived of as a static object, even in the historical study of the educational process. Both in space (the classroom) and in time, the desk, as it were, 'stood still'—a shortcoming we have already gone into in previous publications (Herman et al. 2011). In our view, instead of isolating the school desk as a source for

historical research, future-oriented research should contextualise its use, not only against the background of the prevailing educational practices, but also in relation to the existing cultural-historical practices in other social fields. In this respect photos and illustrations of ‘school desk pedagogy in action’ of course are worth studying, even though they are not so common. As we have witnessed elsewhere (Catteuw et al. 2005) class photos are usually set up with children in their Sunday best, with nice clothes, their arms cross, passive therefore and staring into the lens in an orderly fashion.

## 2.4 Plea for a Dynamic History of the Complex Educational Uses of School Desks

We advise, therefore, in the ‘historiographical operation’ (a concept of de Certeau) not to be pinned down to just one kind of source but to base oneself on a diversity that is as broad as possible. Only in this manner can the limitations and partialities imposed by the documentation used be overcome (Depaepe and Simon 2009). That same remedy also applies for the refinement of the existing Foucauldian interpretation frameworks in respect to the history of the school desk, as well as for the interpretation of the criticism from the New Education movement during the first quarter of the twentieth century, which from time to time can be used as a witness for the prosecution in the case against the school desk. In the Flanders of the 1920s, for instance, educationalists like Edward Peeters and Jozef Verheyen decried these ‘torture instruments’ and ‘tools for suffering’ that completely limited the freedom of the pupils (see Depaepe et al. 2000, p. 87). In doing so, they were echoing Maria Montessori (1909), who in her *Method* had called the ‘scientific’ school desk ‘a tool of slavery in the school’. However, this sharp criticism cannot blind us from the fact that this instrument has remained in the classroom until this day and has even continued to constitute the essence of its material culture. At the most, the classic wooden two-seaters of olden times have been replaced with Formica models, individualised or not, tables and chairs for school use which have not drastically changed the lines of pedagogical-didactical negotiation economy in the class. As we have explained in our study *Order in Progress* (Depaepe et al. 2000), this development did not fundamentally affect the basic patterns of classroom pedagogy. On the contrary: by accepting the teacher, pupils acquired knowledge and ability so as to obtain an as favourable position as possible on the social ladder. That was the essence of what the man in the street called ‘wearing out the seat of your pants on the school bench’. That that school desk had become a single-seater in the meantime did not in fact make much a difference.

Thus, one possible place we can start from in order to take a more dynamic approach to the school desk are the historical studies that try to open and break through the ‘black box’ and the ‘silences’ of the educational behaviour in class. Judging from the title (and again from the iconography on the cover!) there are at least two others, next to *Order in Progress* (Depaepe et al. 2000): the bundles of

documents on the one hand by Grosvenor et al. (1999) and by Braster et al. (2011). Nowhere in any of the articles is there really mention of school desks and while the large number of photos in the documents do show school desks, most class photos reveal nothing about the daily use of the desk—in the sense that they only show a static portrait of the class next to or at their desks. It looks therefore, that we will need here, again and again, to search for other sources for clarification about the daily use of the school desk, autobiographical works for instance. Perhaps the former school teacher Roger Foulon (1985), who recalled a melancholic and romanticised image of ‘the most fabulous profession on earth’ was not far off the mark when he talked about the ‘scholarly liturgy’—whereby the stereotypical layout of desks in the classroom played a cardinal role, which again is reproduced in the photo on the cover.

Iconographic research of photos and illustration of school desks, of which there are many on the internet, are not well catalogued, very much like the studies of school furniture and writing tables in the many education museums (that sprung up like mushrooms at the end of the last century, see Catteeuw 2004). Because anyone who looks closely at the often dilapidated school desks will see the traces of lives: ink spots, graffiti and the such like. Throughout the years, pupils have left carvings on school desks, from hearts to satirical texts and cartoons of certain teachers, to real tirades against the real or alleged educational terror (see [www.flickr.com/photos/45005123@N03/7704697558/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/45005123@N03/7704697558/)). One of the most intriguing and striking illustrations that we have found on the internet to date is that of a boy standing on a desk and urinating—the dream of every schoolboy as this piece of art is called! (see [tempelderbeeldendekunsten.blogspot.be/2008\\_04\\_01\\_archive.html](http://tempelderbeeldendekunsten.blogspot.be/2008_04_01_archive.html))—does this refer to the resistance to the reigning educational regime (De Vries 1993) that goes significantly beyond the often innocent graffiti, or is there more going on? Is this a mere psychoanalytical expression of a fundamental disgust with teaching, or did this photo end up on the internet because of its unusual and at the same time shocking character? The ‘use’ of the school desk by the way is not limited to that one, possible revolutionary moment that is captured on photo, and that takes us back to the temporal dimension of the use of the school desk.

Why has the traditional school desk found a permanent place in the education museum, which, in view of our digression about the lack of dynamism in the study of the object, must also be taken literally. Is the school desk doomed to disappear? Is it because it looked as though it might disappear, that people are now attaching value to it again? That there is a reversal in the trend to transform its use as an everyday object into split-wood or sawdust? Is it for this reason that the school desk has been given a new status, as a museum object? But how is the school desk now presented in this digital age? As a static element? We will come back to this later, but first we would like to indicate that there are other possible destinies for the school desk in the afterlife than museums. Discarded school furniture is sent to low budget countries (Romania for instance, see De Cock 2012) as an act of philanthropy, stories of which appear in reports in newspapers sometimes. It is also important to note—in the light of what we just said—that the school desk is used in these countries within the mental limits and presentations of traditional school settings.



**Fig. 2.4** A school desk, repainted in charming pink colour, ready to be sold for an afterlife at home, retrieved November 2012 from: [www.2dehands.be/business-industrie/kantoor-winkel/schoolbanken/](http://www.2dehands.be/business-industrie/kantoor-winkel/schoolbanken/)

To put it in the terms used in our research, within the rules of the grammar of schooling and grammar of educationalization, which we have been able to confirm with images about Congo (Depaepe 2012). Another alternative is of course the second hand sales of school benches, which is apparently rampant on the internet (see, for example, Fig. 2.4). In many cases, the desks are used in a domestic context.

This ‘new’ setting is interesting of course because it inevitably evokes the link between school and home life—probably one of the most important paradoxes within a historic theory about school (see Depaepe et al. 2008). In any event, we know from historic literature that the use of the school desk in school did not always correlate with its use at home, certainly not in the subjective perception of the individual child or pupil. In this respect the testimony of no other than Walter Benjamin (from around the Berlin period at the beginning of the twentieth century) is particularly revealing:

The doctor discovered I was nearsighted. And he prescribed not only a pair of glasses but a desk. It was very ingeniously constructed. The seat could be adjusted to move toward or away from the slanted desktop that served as a writing surface; in addition, there was a horizontal bar built into the chair back that provided comfortable support, not to mention a little bookrack which crowned the whole and which could slide back and forth. It was not long before the desk at the window had become my favourite spot (...) The desk thus bore a certain similarity to my school bench. But it has this advantage: it was safely hidden away there, and had room for things my school bench knew nothing about. The desk and I were united against it. And hardly had I regained my desk after a dreary day at school, then it gave me new strength. There I could feel myself not only at home but actually in my shell—

just like one of those clerics who are shown in medieval paintings, kneeling at their prie-dieu or sitting at their writing desk, as though encased in armor. In this burrow of mine, I would begin reading (...) I sought out the most peaceful time of day and this most secluded of all spots. I would then open my book to page one with all the solemnity of an explorer setting foot on a new continent. (Benjamin 2006, pp. 148 & 151)

For more than one reason this quotation is an interesting one. First of all, it gives a negative vision on school, and therefore also on the school desk, interpreted as an instrument of the then dominant repressive discipline in everyday school life. Benjamin, as so many did before him and after him, had a bone to pick with school and is pleased having undermined each afternoon the prevailing school authority; again it illustrates how important school is in one's life, but also how important it is to find in the private sphere a spot for its own personal development. The effects of self-development are in no way the simple translation of what education curriculum builders had in mind by stipulating the subject matter of the school disciplines. Moreover, Benjamin's reference to medieval paintings, the clerics, kneeling, and writing at desks, make us aware of associations between visual modes. Images are not hermetically sealed in a singular discourse, but are contextualized and made to resonate with broader social, cultural and educational issues.

## 2.5 Education Museums and Exhibition Projects: Allies or Enemies for Such an Approach?

It may meanwhile have become sufficiently clear: teachers and pupils, the daily actors of the classroom, did something with the school desk and the school desk probably did something with them as well. To further clarify this, school or education museums are undoubtedly suitable partners, not only in heritage and remembrance education, but even in the development of new insights in the history of education itself. To our mind, the historiography of education can take another step forward in the light of the subject matter raised here, in particular if more modern forms of production and communication of scholarly work are developed, which, unlike the customary publications, contain real representation. We are thinking, for example, of specific exhibition projects being devised, either in cooperation with museum pedagogy or as stand-alone initiatives. As we have already said, it is impossible to imagine the school museums without the school desk. Nevertheless that desk, as an icon of the educational past, is generally very 'mute' in that setting, too. This applies right through to the catalogue as we can see from the iconography of the Ypres museum guide (the cover as well as on the inside, see *Guide* 1999; and see also: [www.schoolreis.be/schoolreis/onderwijsmuseum.html](http://www.schoolreis.be/schoolreis/onderwijsmuseum.html)).

Exhibition projects aimed at resolutely bringing the dynamic of the school desk into museums can therefore be considered as a new finality for scientific research. And provided we also manage to represent the various different layers and contexts inherent in the interpretation of the history of the school desk (and its educational use) properly and effectively (for example inter- and hyper-textual, and inter- and

hyper-visual), those museological projects will undoubtedly also contribute to modernising the material culture (and representation) of scientific research. Unfortunately, such projects have not as yet taken root to any great extent within the current context of the international historiography of education, although we can certainly point to some promising initiatives in this direction.

Judging from the websites in question, it would appear that initiatives on the Iberian peninsula take the lead, even though elsewhere in Europe there are some interesting virtual projects underway. In terms of the school desk itself, the production of the Italian documentary *Tra Banchi e Quaderni* (2007) might have been a step in this direction. But it remains very much the question whether the makers intended it like this. In fact, there, too, the desks ‘stand still’ and the design of the school museum project may be called conservative, if not old-fashioned. Only the professional camera work and the suggestive music bring the dead object to life again to a certain extent. Certainly, it is in this direction of ‘evocation’ from the ‘living’ past—in making the ‘intangible’ educational heritage ‘tangible’ (see Yanes Cabrera 2007)—that we want to move by creating pedagogic museology (or even museum pedagogy) for school museums. However, there is still a long way to go. In this world, in which change is generally rare, where amateurs like former teachers and retired policy makers decide on things with good intentions, a large backlog has accumulated in the specialised fields of museum architecture and design. Particular when we compare their often dilettante and nostalgic approach with projects set up professionally and underpinned scientifically, such as Bruno Latour’s exhibition on political objects and the *res publica*: ‘von Realpolitik zur Dingpolitik’ at the *Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie* in Karlsruhe, in 2005 ([www.bruno-latour.fr/node/333](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/333); Latour and Weibel 2005). During our search for examples that approach history of education exhibitions on this philosophy, the infectious attempts of some Spanish and Portuguese colleagues (e.g. from Lisbon, Madrid and Seville; see, resp., Mogarro 2010; [www.ucm.es/info/muscocio/](http://www.ucm.es/info/muscocio/); [www.museopedagogicoandaluz.com/museo.php](http://www.museopedagogicoandaluz.com/museo.php)) are already attracting attention, amongst which—in connection with school furniture and school desks—the virtual museum in Murcia ([www.um.es/muvhe/user/acerca.php](http://www.um.es/muvhe/user/acerca.php)), which definitely deserves to be mentioned. At the theoretical level, it tries to relate to the research by Antonio Viñao (2012), who, by studying the material and immaterial pedagogical culture, tries to build a bridge between memory and heritage.

This is undoubtedly much more relevant than playing the role of the nostalgic school (and, even though not in old clothes, sitting at old school desks—the so-called ‘historical teaching’!), a situation we once came across in school museums in Germany (see, for example, [www.das-schulmuseum.de/20-0-HISTORISCHER-UNTERRICHT.html](http://www.das-schulmuseum.de/20-0-HISTORISCHER-UNTERRICHT.html)). On that same website, one can see a picture with the minister of the *Bundesland* in question (Nordrhein-Westfalen) sitting at a school desk. That underlines once again the iconic role of the school desk in the educational memory of the masses, but probably also that policy-makers are more easily inclined to go along with popular, nostalgic discourses about education museums than the scientific ones. In any case, at the opening of the municipal education museum of Ypers, in 1990, the prominent guests, including the minister, insisted, for the sake of press photographers, also on sitting at the school desks (copy in personal documentation, see Fig. 2.5).





**Fig. 2.5** Opening of the Ypres School Museum, 1990 (Archives of the *Stedelijk Onderwijsmuseum* in Ypres)

One boost to the development of this expertise certainly exists in allowing exhibition projects to be counted as a Master's thesis. Although the theoretic possibility (in art education, etc.) exists, we have not yet come across this in academic educational circles. And yet this would be an ideal possibility for creating a bridge between the academic world and the public world. In terms of the history of education, this would enable us to scan alternative ways of finding out about the past: heritage, collective memory, tradition. History would thus be brought a lot closer to the public (driven by the public as it were), but also we do not want to affect our scientific content. That is not about pedagogic nostalgia for the mission that was prevalent at the end of the nineteenth beginning of the twentieth century of uplifting the population, but about valorising our expertise. With the ultimate goal moreover of having a positive impact on research and education. We will thus be also competing with non-academic presentations of the past. It is not obvious at first sight where we should start: should we integrate them into a scientific account? Or should we seek conflict? Or should we learn to live with these 'paradoxes' of historic representation? In any event it seems worthwhile discovering more about these new challenges. They force us to continue to think about how we present the past: as history 'for' the people, or as history 'with' and 'by the people' (Hamilton 2011)?

Within a digital landscape that is transforming our sense of time and space, the question 'what is history for' is more pressing than ever because numerous artefacts and testimonies of the past seem to be just a click away on the internet. But it remains, for our part, an illusion to think that history is something which exists outside us, even if such fragmentation of the historical knowledge in a chronological and antiquarian acts and facts history usually suits the neo-liberally inspired policy and opinion makers. This is because the present is increasingly advancing in our society, one reason for that being the fear of an uncertain future which is of course

caused by us (see the book of Hartog 2012<sup>2</sup>). A striking element of this current presentism is the *perpetuum mobile*: we are continuously in movement, in transformation; our projects stay unfinished, we are busy, too busy—work in progress, as it is known—a flexibility that betrays fear of ageing and tries to ignore the time dimension of life completely. Especially in such a context, it should become clearer than ever that a historic researcher does not so much work on a (dead) past, but rather on a (fully alive) time, and this category inherently includes the focus on the interplay of past, present, and future (Bantigny 2013).

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