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An Atypical Biography Concluding More Than Twenty Years of Decroly Research

Une biographie atypique concluant plus de vingt ans de recherches sur Decroly

Una biografía atípica que concluye más de veinte años de investigación sobre Decroly

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Résumé de l'article

À la demande des éditeurs de cette revue, cet article propose un résumé en anglais d'une biographie récemment publiée en français sur le pionnier belge de l'éducation, Ovide Decroly (sur qui nous avons déjà publié plusieurs études), intitulée Ovide Decroly (1871–1932) : une approche atypique ? (2022, 299 p., vol. 4 de la série de monographies sur la théorie et l'histoire de l'éducation) et publiée à Kingston, Ontario, par le Groupe de recherche international sur la théorie et l'histoire de l'éducation situé à la Faculté d'éducation de l'Université Queen's. Cet ouvrage est l'aboutissement de plus de 20 ans de recherches par les auteurs Marc Depaepe, Frank Simon et Angelo Van Gorp sur cette figure éminente de l'histoire belge de l'éducation. Nous exposons ici brièvement le contexte, les points de départ méthodologiques et le contenu de cet ouvrage.

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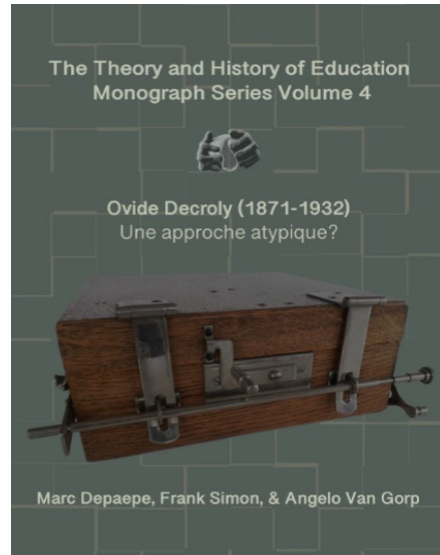
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An Atypical Biography Concluding More Than Twenty Years of Decroly Research

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Abstract

This article provides, at the request of the editors of this journal, an English-language summary of a biography recently published in French about the Belgian educational pioneer Ovide Decroly, on whom we have already published a number of studies: *Ovide Decroly (1871-1932): une approche atypique?* (Theory and History of Education International Research Group, housed at the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 2022), 299 pp. (Theory and History of Education Monograph Series, vol. 4). Of that work (Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2022), which represents the conclusion of more than 20 years of research by the authors on this eminent figure in the Belgian history of education, we outline here briefly the background, methodological starting points, and contents.

Keywords: Ovide Decroly, Brussels (Belgium), New Education, history of education, biography, theory, methodology and historiography of educational history and innovations

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Résumé

À la demande des éditeurs de cette revue, cet article propose un résumé en anglais d'une biographie récemment publiée en français sur le pionnier belge de l'éducation, Ovide Decroly (sur qui nous avons déjà publié plusieurs études), intitulée *Ovide Decroly (1871–1932) : une approche atypique ?* (2022, 299 p., vol. 4 de la série de monographies sur la théorie et l'histoire de l'éducation) et publiée à Kingston, Ontario, par le Groupe de recherche international sur la théorie et l'histoire de l'éducation situé à la Faculté d'éducation de l'Université Queen's. Cet ouvrage est l'aboutissement de plus de 20 ans de recherches par les auteurs Marc Depaepe, Frank Simon et Angelo Van Gorp sur cette figure éminente de l'histoire belge de l'éducation. Nous exposons ici brièvement le contexte, les points de départ méthodologiques et le contenu de cet ouvrage.

Mots-clés : Ovide Decroly, Bruxelles (Belgique), L'éducation nouvelle, biographie pédagogique, histoire de l'éducation, théorie, méthodologie et historiographie des innovations pédagogiques

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Resumen

Este artículo proporciona, respondiendo a la solicitud de los editores de esta revista, un resumen en inglés de una biografía recientemente publicada en francés sobre el pionero educativo belga Ovide Decroly, sobre quien ya hemos publicado varios estudios: *Ovide Decroly (1871- 1932): une approach atypique?* (Kingston, Ontario, Canadá, Theory and History of Education International Research Group, alojado en la Facultad de Educación, Queen's University, y organizado por Queen's, 2022) 299 págs. (Theory and History of Education Monograph Series, vol. 4). De ese trabajo (Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2022), que representa la conclusión de más de 20 años de investigación de los autores sobre esta eminente figura de la historia belga de la educación, esbozamos aquí brevemente los antecedentes, puntos de partida metodológicos y contenido.

Palabras clave : Bruselas (Bélgica), Nueva Educación, historia de la educación, biografía, teoría, metodología e historiografía de la historia y las innovaciones educativas

Background

In 1999, a collective research project resulted in the publication of an article about “our ‘friend’ Ovide Decroly (1871-1932)” (Depaepe & Simon, 1999), the Brussels school physician who can still be regarded today as one of the most admirable and also, unquestionably, the most renowned of all Belgian “pedagogues.” Referring to him as a “friend” was appropriate not only because the French word “ami” rhymes with his last name, but also out of a true interest in and even admiration for the important contribution Decroly made in several areas of education. Indeed, it would be impossible to speak of the development of educational ideas, mentalities, and realities in Belgium without mentioning him.

Yet, in our research we did not wish to join the voices of those in his own circles who, especially after his death, praised him to the skies. From the outset—including in that first article, but also in the dozens that would follow—we were critical of the ahistorical way in which his cherished notions and initiatives were understood. His life and work were “idealized” and even “mythologized” with a view to transmitting them to subsequent generations of practitioners and theoreticians. This exaggeration went so far that, despite his freethinking worldview, and in our view paradoxically, he seemed to be placed on a pedestal as the “patron saint” of the New Education (Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2003), though our comparison was not always well received. Contemporary adherents of what remains of the “New Education” (or “New School”) movement in particular, evidently did not always find this easy to accept. Perhaps this was because members of those circles wished to preserve intact the pedagogical legacy of their great precursor.

Although we can sympathise with educational thought that considers the ultimate goal of education and teaching to be the advancement of the autonomy and emancipation of the individual, as historical researchers we were struck repeatedly by how great the gap is between rhetoric and reality. This is especially the case where arguments are lifted wholesale from the past in order to legitimize one’s own positions, without taking into account the diversity and complexity of the contexts in which that “legacy” should be understood. This is clearly not the place to go into this matter more extensively, but it would of course be wrong to conclude that we therefore subscribe to what is generally an equally ahistorical critique of the child-centred approach as “fun pedagogy” and/or “deschooling.” The history of education, in our view, is not a grab bag from which one can simply pull out context-free arguments in order to get one’s own back when it comes to contemporary discussions. Simple dichotomies between “old” and “new,” “learning” and “playing,” and so on are also inadequate to summarize the complex lines of development in educational thought and practice.

For anyone who wishes to examine the acquisition of knowledge in disciplines such as medicine, psychology, educational theory and the related but now outdated fields of “pedology” and “pedotechnics” from the perspective of the history of science, theory of science, and/or sociology of science, such insights are clearly anything but admirable (see, among others, Depaepe, 1993). But in Decroly research, these critical views seem

generally to be absent, apart from a few exceptions in peripheral corners of the history of science where the work of Decroly is sometimes mentioned. It is precisely for that reason that, over the past two decades, we have published several studies on Decroly which, in addition to looking at non-scientific factors, brought to light factors and influences internal to science and, in so doing, placed his life and work in what we considered a more accurate interpretive framework. The doctoral dissertation of Angelo Van Gorp in 2003, and published as a book in 2005 (i.e., Van Gorp, 2005a), done under the supervision of the other two authors of this article, was thus the first study—albeit in Dutch—to examine the relationship among the medical, biological, psychological, sociological and educational considerations in Decroly's work. In our view, this method was the best way to burst the bubble once and for all of the cheap hagiography that surrounded him.

But there was still no true biography of Decroly, despite all the studies that have appeared over the years, mostly by his disciples, the so-called “Decrolyans,” or in line with the adherents of the New Education movement. The most recent example, and probably the one that is best undergirded with archival material, is the work of Sylvain Wagnon (2013), who in his title explicitly labels Decroly a “pedagogue of the *Éducation nouvelle*.” Faithful to tradition, the work subscribes to the dominant view of the Brussels school physician as a charismatic educator and a great educational innovator, whose merit in advocating a more active and child-centred approach cannot be sufficiently emphasized. In a sense, this interpretation means nearly unconditional allegiance to the commemorative book (*Hommage*, [1933]) that was dedicated posthumously to Decroly. All in all, the main accounts provided therein, which were doubtless further accentuated after his relatively early death in 1932, thus had a tenacious existence. And anyone who, like us, wished to revise that image was soon seen by Decroly's followers as an iconoclast.

Methodological Starting Points

We continued nevertheless to advance a more critical biographical approach, one that would once and for all move beyond the traditional narrative about Decroly. With that aim in mind, Van Gorp, who in the meantime had become a professor at the University of Landau in Germany, organized a working seminar at his university on 19 March 2019, which would serve as the basis for our full Decroly biography to conclude the many years of research on this figure. It seemed at that time that Van Gorp's former supervisors, Depaepe (Leuven/Kortrijk) and Simon (Ghent), who had both become emeritus professors by then, would have more time for research and writing. However, in the end it turned out, for all sorts of unforeseen reasons—the coronavirus being but one of them—that this had been wishful thinking.

We are not afraid, despite the charges levelled in the clarifying collective volume of Renders & Veltman (2022), of a ground-breaking theoretical concept. Yet after our analysis of the factual material we have gathered over the many years, we began to wonder more and more whether a search for a conceptual unity in the life and work of a

given person is not mainly a reflection of the desire of the biographer rather than of the underlying historical reality being described. Both of these questions undoubtedly deserve further exploration, all the more since Renders' and Veltman's *Fear of Theory* had only just been published when we submitted our manuscript to the publisher, and so we were not able to do much more than include the title in our extensive bibliographical references. As a result, it is interesting to wonder whether, had we had access to the work earlier, we might have taken a different path...

But what was their volume actually about? According to the editors, "modern biography is still woefully undertheorized" (Renders & Veltman, 2022, p. 16). Hence the request made to various biographers to reconstruct the theory behind their book: "How [sic] does the backside of a biography look like, the side one cannot see? How does the invisible hand look like?" Some people see a solution in the use of "the microhistorical method"; others "by using psychology" (Renders and Veltman, 2022, p. 15). After all, biography "has the ability to confront abstract historical conceptions with the concrete, the individual, and the extraordinary" (Palmen, 2022, p. 103), and the authors thus also stress the importance of avoiding hagiography with the most essential driving force for years of sustained work, namely curiosity. All of these aspects can easily be found in our historical-educational oeuvre. Those who know us know that the justifiably emphasized "fear of theory" is completely alien to us. We have repeatedly pointed out that the field of educational historiography deserves a more consciously theoretical treatment of the educational past, certainly when it comes to biography (such as of the "great thinkers" of education), extolled by some as the *Königsdisciplin* of history and dubbed by others as a "fossil" from ancient times...

In the first chapter of our "atypical" biography, we set this all out extensively. Moreover, in the subsequent chapters, many aspects and domains touched upon by Renders & Veltman (2022), including daily life, the "accusation" of hagiography, the tension between "history" and "memory," microhistory, etc., are also addressed, based on our careful primary source research and leading to the inevitable conclusion that we would not have written our atypical biography any differently even had we been able to take this recent book into consideration.

The reason for this, as already stated, is the vast amount of biographical material we gathered and that brought us face to face with the facts: how in heaven's name can you summarize a life of more than sixty years, as in the case of Decroly, in a few hundred pages, without doing injustice to the richness and diversity of coincidences, circumstances, events, relationships, networks, etc. that made his life what it was? Our detective work in the archives has in itself yielded an enormous "laundry list" of almost 2000 relevant items. We have now gathered them into a database that we have not yet published but that, after the publication of our biography, will be made accessible via ResearchGate as a "panoramic biography and bibliography" for further research (Van Gorp, Simon & Depaepe, to be published in 2022). The major challenge for our Decroly biography seemed to us not so much to lie in the search for the most plausible "plot" for the "making of" Decroly's life, but rather the processing of the vast quantity of material he left behind, a significant part of which is housed in the archives of the *Centre*

d'études decrolyennes in Uccle, at the site of the Decroly school. Decroly wrote wherever he was: on the train, on the tram, on the bus, and during his transatlantic trips—even on a ship—and on whatever surface he could find, with a preference for the backs of invitations, advertisements, receipts, death notices, etc. Such handwritten notes are a goldmine of the creative way his insights came to him, but it is often difficult and discouraging to decipher them. This is not only because of the difficulty in reading his handwriting, but also because they were often written in haste, and contain mistakes or are incomplete. Moreover, Decroly's scientific work is particularly fragmentary in structure. In any case, he did not leave his followers and adherents any sizeable work of synthesis. It is thus difficult to determine the extent to which his subjective experience and the construction of scientific expertise coincided. Nevertheless, that laundry list of facts attests abundantly clearly to the hectic life Decroly led as doctor, professor, and socially engaged scientist.

But let us return to the atypical biography that we set out with. Why did we decide not to follow a linear chronological structure based on the “facts”? First, because the inevitable selection that the biographer—or, in our case, biographers—must make necessarily risks leading to very specific and potentially one-sided presentations of complex realities. And that is not even taking into account the many methodological pitfalls that come with the writing of a biography (see, among others also, Renders & de Haan, 2013). Think, for instance, of the empathy and the psychologization of the subject under study, which can easily give way to a sort of “presentist” *Hineininterpretierung* of past human relationships as well as to outdated conceptions in the context of current ways of thinking and problematic areas. For in order to save the unity, coherence, rationality, and causality of the narrative, or even more importantly, the discourse that is present in them, the author's imagination often intervenes. However, this is seen as less and less of a problem within the genre of biography, given the wafer-thin boundary between fact and fiction. And yet the question remains as to what extent personality traits that are deemed to transcend time can shape a person's life. To deduce a preordained life course from the large volume of primary source material is, in the end, a tricky task. Personal characteristics and driving forces, which are often presented as highly stable through successive phases of life, should be seen as rather shaky under the impact of chance and subject to the pressures of specific situations... and that was indisputably the case with Decroly. What the precise driving forces are behind the life of each person is in any case enveloped in mystery, since any answer to that question is inevitably based on speculation.

That is why in the first, introductory chapter, we spend a relatively long time on the theoretical and methodological background of the biography. We conclude that whatever one's ambitions in this regard may be, a multifaceted approach to the subject is needed, from as many relevant perspectives as possible: family background, intellectual influences such as membership in the “traveling library” of scientific conceptions (see, e.g., Popkewitz, 2021), and participation in existing scientific networks, for example. We were struck, in this regard, that much of our earlier research on the topic—publications from the first two decades of the 21st century—could easily

be reused. Rereading them confirmed our conviction that they had lost little of their scientific value and therefore deserved broader dissemination in another language. To date, we had published very little in French, and it was clear to us from the outset that a biography of Ovide Decroly needed to be written in that language, which was his own. The decision to reuse some earlier texts was obviously convenient for pragmatic reasons as well: it spared us the need for duplicate research, but that was far from the main reason. Rather, it was the conviction that whatever is good—and has perhaps not yet received much attention, partly because they escaped the attention of the largely French-speaking followers of Decroly due to the language of their publication (mainly English, but also German, Dutch, Spanish, etc.)—did not need to be redone. In other words, it is now high time to retrace our steps in the opposite direction and to introduce this atypical biography, written in French, to an English-speaking readership.

Contents and Structure

Our book comprises twelve chapters in all, half of which are new. The other half, as already mentioned, were texts which had been published previously, and which, other than one exception that had already appeared in French, have for the first time been translated into Decroly's mother tongue and incorporated into the new conceptual framework of our atypical biography. Our structure drew on the guiding theme of "stepping stones" that are added to the end of each chapter. As a result, we can distinguish three levels of substantive approach: 1) the application of older insights, supplemented by 2) the results of new research, based on the countless factual elements from the aforementioned panoramic biography and focussing principally on critical points in Decroly's life and work; and 3) meta-reflexive considerations about our own approach and of educational historiography in general. The latter, alongside the interludes serving as stepping stones, is the case mainly in the introductory chapter, in which the methodological starting points discussed above are set out, albeit in a different order and structure.

The dominant idea is that "demythologizing" previous discourses in educational historiography became very early on the hallmark of our approach. Carefully cherished narratives from the pedagogical legacy often turned out, on closer analysis, to be much too good to be true. The same can be said about the unpublished biography of Decroly by his wife, Agnès Guisset, which she wrote, literally in two exercise books, probably in the early 1950s. It was kept in the archives of the aforementioned *Centre d'études decrolyennes*, and was used later by many researchers as the pre-eminent guide for describing Ovide, as we have demonstrated in the article on the "canonization" of Decroly. This examination constitutes the second chapter of the book, since it follows naturally on from the theoretical and methodological considerations of the first chapter.

Based on the work of Guisset, Decroly was regarded from a historical and especially an educational perspective almost exclusively as a "hero" on the educational scene. He was regarded as having personally come close to the ideal "human being," and thus became a model for all of humanity: hard-working, driven, and highly intelligent; a man of action at the service of progress through science, who was tirelessly striving to

improve education and enhance life on earth, especially for children. As we have already noted, such an interpretation, in which *Wahrheit und Dichtung* (Truth and Fiction) are frequently intertwined, must be tested against a fact-based approach, with sufficient attention to critical incidents in the life of the subject. This need not, in our view, detract in any way from admiration for Decroly. On the contrary, it seems to us that a more correct assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a person can only lead to greater appreciation of his achievements.

Take, for instance, the excerpts from Decroly's (love) letters to his "colleague" Marie-Louise Wauthier, 33 years his junior. These letters she had published only in 1985, after his closest relatives had died, but they are ignored completely by the Decrolyans. As far as we are concerned, that is completely unjustified, since the letters (Wauthier, [1985]) show among other things how a vulnerable Decroly struggled, within the *petit bourgeois* milieu of the 1920s and 1930s, with the uncertainties of illness and aging. Moreover, they provide, in addition to various anecdotes of the daily life of the professor so admired by Wauthier, a good insight into the way Decroly experienced his pedagogical missions abroad. Apart from serving for further speculation as to the nature of their "love affair," the letters were also useful to us for certain chapters on critical periods in his life. The little details of daily life, which can make an individual's biography banal but also attractive, constitute in our view the "flesh and blood" on the frame of the structural processes of the developing society in which the subject under study lived and worked. These are often the refreshing, sometimes even surprising discoveries and twists and turns of everyday life, which can easily pierce the bubble or even disprove the generally pompous claims of the "grand theory."

It is for this reason that in the new parts written specifically for this biography, we strove to confront the idealized image by staying close to the facts. Thus, in our third chapter, in which we focus—not on his death, which generally served as the starting point for the mythmaking around Decroly—on his origins, upbringing and background, and the phase of his life in which his study and intellectual formation as a doctor and specialization in neurology unfolded.

Chapter four—the only article that had already been published in French before (Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2011)—further examines that theme by showing how much the medical paradigm, and especially the clinical approach, definitively shaped Decroly's expertise, including in the area of childrearing and education. In his diagnosis as well as the treatment of juvenile delinquency, for example, he was guided not only by medical terminology but also by the idea that society could be restored to health by the application of scientific insights. It is, thus, far from surprising that a relatively large number of physicians have been involved, worldwide, in the development of empirical research with children. Physicians put themselves forward as protectors of the vulnerable members of society, and their own discourse about science was readily picked up by others, serving, incidentally, to further enhance the social regard and moral prestige enjoyed by the medical profession. This was certainly the case in Brussels, where Decroly had been appointed a "supplementary school physician," as early as 1903, for schools for "pedagogically backward children."

In the fifth chapter, we focus on his activities during the First World War, and in particular on his contribution to the institute for war orphans established in 1915, known as the *Foyer des Orphelins*. Thanks to detailed archival research, we show how important a role that institute played in enabling Decroly to keep on refining his clinical views and putting to the test his almost maniacal commitment to keeping and updating records. That was, in fact, the basis for his medical-pedagogical research. From that perspective, the *Foyer* was the laboratory par excellence where Decroly gained scientific experience. If there was—as the Decroly tradition claims—a turning point when attention to the study of “abnormal” children was definitively extended to “normal” children, this is likely the period when that happened.

How exactly this shift in emphasis occurred, which in our view was relatively “seamless,” is set out from a history-of-science perspective in the sixth chapter, which dates in its original form from 2005 (i.e., Van Gorp, 2005b). In no sense was there a “paradigm shift.” Decroly, who in 1901 began taking in “problem” children of the Brussels bourgeoisie in Uccle—and according to tradition was partly behind the development of special education in Belgium—six years later had established a school in the Belgian capital for “normal” children from the same background. In short, Decroly the educator developed from the physician, without in any way surrendering his medical frames of reference or patterns of thinking. The notions of “evolution” and “adaptation,” like the tension between nature and nurture that can be found in his biological, psychological as well as his sociological vision, are excellent examples of this.

Decroly was of course not alone in this process. In the end, he was supported by an entire network in Brussels and throughout Belgium, one that, moreover, earned its spurs in international scientific development partly by organizing various international congresses. The first and only international congress on pedology in 1911 (Ioteyko, 1912; Depaepe, 1987) can be seen as a model thereof. Which associations and figures from among those Belgian networks played a key role is examined in chapter seven, originally published in 2004 (i.e., Van Gorp, Depaepe & Simon, 2004). In reality, we have simply changed tack: instead of looking at the internal scientific side, we turn our focus to the extra-scientific side of the history of the development and dissemination of knowledge about the scientific study of the child.

Chapter eight goes a step further by examining Decroly’s international relations. Was it because his ideas were less successful in the United States than in Latin America that two of his transatlantic trips were to the El Dorado of test psychology, or simply because there he was able to meet international authorities in the field? Based partly on the notes of his travelling companion Raymond Buyse, the first three months of his “pilgrimage” of 1922 (see Depaepe & D’hulst, 2011), funded in part by American sources, were carefully described. The same is true of his study visit to Colombia, where Decroly was welcomed in 1925 as a great star, thanks in part to the efforts of Agustín Nieto Caballero, founder of the *Gimnasio Moderno* in Bogotá. Decroly gave various lectures and demonstrations there, as well as in Boyacá, Antioquia, and Tunja (see also Sáenz Obregón, Saldarriaga & Ospina, 1997; Herrera, 1999). In a farewell letter sent to him by the teachers at the *Escuela Normal* (teacher training college) in

Bogotá, he was once again praised as a committed and honest “apostle” for humanity and the child. However, indications that this peak period of his life was not entirely rosy can be found in the letters of Wauthier, certainly as regards Decroly’s third and last transatlantic trip: his attendance at the ninth International Congress of Psychology in 1929 at Yale University in New Haven (Ninth International Congress of Psychology, 1930). The first signs of his declining health appeared at this time.

Before going further into this topic, we return in chapter nine to the dissemination of his educational work in Belgium, which would, of course, continue after his death in 1932. And how better to do that than by shedding light on the development of the school that he himself founded in 1907? His own “Decroly school”—also known, based on the place where it was established, as *L’Ermitage*—would in fact become a sort of “pedagogical Mecca” visited by various stars of the New Education movement. That article, which we published in 2008 in German, focuses not only on the success of the institution, but perhaps even more on its vulnerability, and in particular on the “struggle” for the custodial right to the authentic message once the Master was no longer around. Amélie Hamaïde, who was ready to assume the torch in the international forum, played a key role in this regard, as did Decroly’s wife.

In the tenth chapter, which seeks to look at impact of a “Decrolyan movement” beyond Belgium, this comes even more clearly to the fore. It is no accident that we gave this chapter about the networks that formed around Decroly’s pedagogy the title, based on new source research, “little worlds with often grand international ambitions.” Apart from Hamaïde and the New Education movement (see also Wagnon, 2015), the vicissitudes of the *Palais Mondial* or *Mundaneum* are also addressed here. Today, one can perhaps best describe this initiative as a sort of “internet on paper”: from the underlying notion that knowledge would promote peace, they sought to collect knowledge in every form in which it was then available (newspapers, magazines, books, etc.) and to transform it into a universal bibliographical repertory. For Decroly, who was a true *Mundaneum* militant, the *Palais Mondial* constituted yet another platform for promoting the peace-loving concept of the New Education movement. Last but not least, this chapter also contains an extensive paragraph on the development of tests, games, and psychological cinematography as techniques that could be used both in psycho-pedagogical education and in research in that field.

The material aspect of the research leads us in chapter eleven to the question whether Decroly can be viewed, not least from a financial standpoint, as the “prototype” of a modern researcher, who heads up an entire stable of enthusiastic team members. Such questions, which we already examined in 2018 (i.e., Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2018) and included here, constitute in any case an often un(der)explored research topic in educational history, which generally ignores financial questions and backgrounds. Although it is not easy to find out where all the money came from to support the research and the maintenance of the school, it appears that Decroly—a networker and classic holder of multiple offices—was able to make a good living from his work, although without being an egoistic glutton. The fact that he occasionally refused

payment and financed his personal initiatives with private means (including from an inheritance from his father-in-law) are ample proof of that.

The twelfth and final chapter traces Decroly during the 1930s, in the last three years of his life. Based on what is available in the archives and from published fragments of letters, we can reconstruct how the man—despite his failing health—tried unflaggingly to work as before. We thus have a fine, albeit unfinished image of what he sought to achieve, as an engaged person and scientist in the daily life of his final years, despite the fact that he was forced to obey the limits set by—to paraphrase him (see Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2010)—his psychic ego, the social rules of the bourgeoisie, and most of all the biological limitations of his own body.

It is for the reader to judge how truly atypical our biography is, which in the title of the book is in the form of a question. Whatever the case, it goes without saying that we have gone against the stream of the dominant Decroly reception

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