

## **DESIDERIUS ERASMUS (1466-1536)**

Inventor of classically and Christianly informed education

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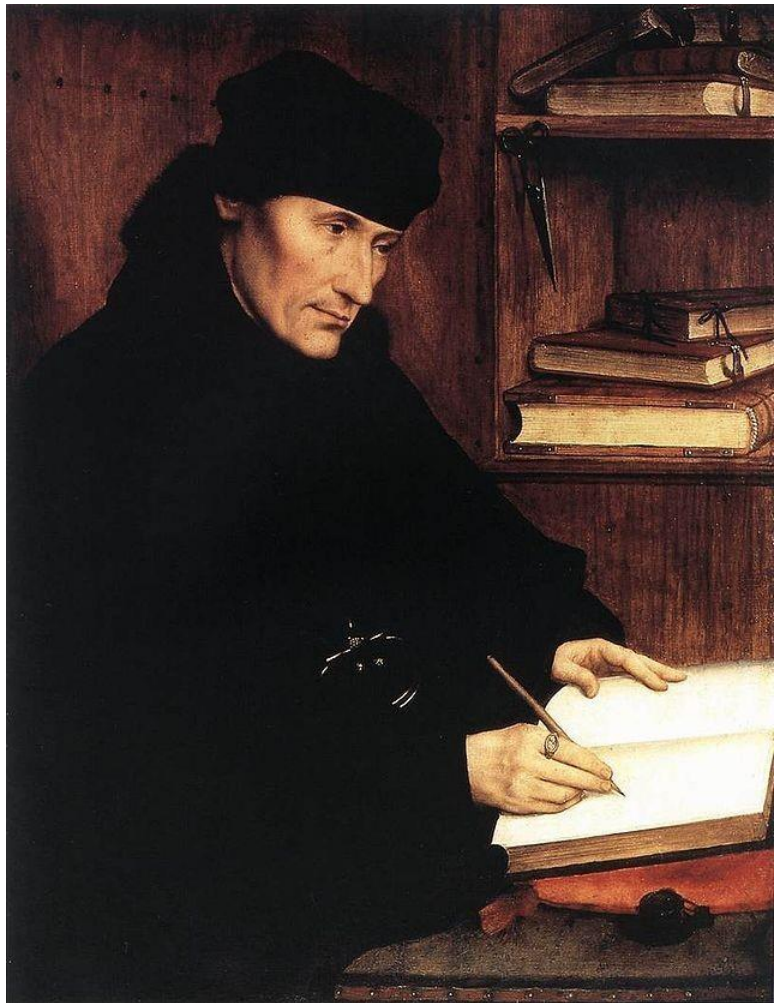
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## 1. Passport

Nor is it a wonder that Erasmus can still speak with convincing authority to those who have an interest in educational theory and practice

(Sowards, 1988, p. 131).



Desiderius Erasmus, 28 October 1466/1469, Rotterdam, 12 July 1536, Basel

## 2. Narrative element

*The story below describes Erasmus' experiences of school and study.*

Hardly a day went by in my life without a pen in my hand. From an early age, I was passionate about studying, literature and authorship. When I look back at my schooldays, I am quite surprised that it turned out this way. After all, a person's study preference, or a direction in which he would like to develop his talents, can often be traced back to an inspiring and enthusiastic teacher, one who offers perspective on a world of knowledge in which you would also like to delve more deeply. This does not apply in my case – in fact, it was far from that. In my youth and before I entered the Stein monastery near Gouda, more or less under pressure and not even twenty years old, I saw a large number of schools from the inside and my experiences there were unreservedly negative, not to say traumatic.

It started at an early age at the Latin school in Gouda. I was born in my grandmother's house in Rotterdam, but I spent my first years at school in Gouda. I will leave the reason for this aside for now. Together with my older brother, Pieter, I learned the principles of grammar, of Latin that is, from Pieter Winckel, the schoolmaster. According to popular belief, he was a pious and good-natured man which basically means that he was never accused of gambling, visiting prostitutes, drunkenness and that kind of thing. But he was a person who put himself first, was extremely mean, did not stand out from the crowd when it came to insight, and who hated language and literature (i.e. classical literature), apart from the small amount of confused literature that he had studied himself. At the age of fourteen, I once wrote him a stylistically correct letter. Winckel responded curtly saying that if I should write such a letter again, I should add a commentary; he himself always wrote in a simple fashion, point by point, because that was his style.

Generally speaking, it was not any different in Deventer and 's-Hertogenbosch. My criticism of the teachers I had is not only levelled at the fact that they did not keep up to date with developments in their field or that they thought they were born to cure us of anything we had learned about language and literature, so that they could drum their own ignorance into us. My criticism mainly focuses on the way they treated us. As soon as they spotted a boy with a noble disposition, intelligence and with exceptional talents, their main objective was to break and humiliate him with beatings, threats, incantations and other such punishments. I remember very well how one of my teachers wanted to find out how I would stand up to the cane. He accused me of an offence and beat me. I lost all pleasure in my studies and came close to pining away from distress. I wonder how much talent has been ruined by these tyrants who see thrashing someone as an enjoyable hobby. In my opinion, we should take even more care of students by encouraging them and being persistent with requirements,

repetition and incentives. This is the stick with which we, as disciples of Jesus, the personification of gentleness, should chastise our children.

In one of my most popular pieces of writing, *In Praise of Folly (Lof der Zotheid)*, I lash out at this professional group. Here I portray the members as starving down and outs, having a misplaced notion of their knowledge, turning their schools into treadmills and torture chambers, and allowing their frightened pupils to tremble at their threatening looks and voices. I do portray them quite pointedly, hiding behind the obvious foolishness, but I am deeply serious; I mean what I have written there. Furthermore, I have not only expressed criticism – as a man of letters, I have also drawn up an alternative in several of my pieces of writing which I notice is being copied.

### 3. The historical context

Erasmus' traumatic experiences at school played an important role in his efforts to develop a modern educational concept. This concept was shared in the circles of humanist scholars, but in his role as the humanist prince, Erasmus was a guiding light because he was recognised by his contemporaries as the most important author and theorist in the field of education. And it is precisely because of those negative experiences of the educational incompetence of his teachers that 'Erasmus' most substantial and most original ideas about education had to do with the subject of the teacher' (Soward, 1986, p.124). The criticism and the alternative that he had to offer do not stand alone, but are directly connected to the discovery of the social world and ways of thinking in the classical era. So this brings us to the historical context of Erasmus' ambition to modernise didactics and education.

#### 3.1. Humanism

Erasmus was one of the most influential figures in the rediscovery of the intellectual world and way of thinking in the classical era. It began in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and can be summed up in the term 'humanism'. Supporters of this movement were 'humanists'; language scholars, those who practised the *studia humaniora*, or in other words the study of the Greek and Latin languages and literature, the poetry, the rhetoric and ethics as recorded in classical writings and as discussed in bygone days in the curriculum of the classical era (*septem artes liberales*) (Weiler, 1997, p.11; Trapman, 2017, p. 19).

The pacemaker of this innovative movement was the Italian poet and man of letters, Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), who adopted a hard line against the entire medieval scholastic education of his time. He hoped for the start of a new cultural development, a new era. In the field of culture, this had to relate to the classical world which had once been sublimely reflected by the Roman Empire. For this reason, attention was largely focused on the literary heritage of that world. The heritage was never completely forgotten, but was once again brought to life and studied; people wanted to study and become thoroughly familiar with the 'worldview' it contained. It was precisely the innovative side of these humanists that made them want to learn and study the classical heathen authors in their entirety, as complete texts and in their original, authentic form. Their labour brought the existing ideals and notions of the classical world to life again, not only through the publication of texts, but also because they themselves became authors of texts that were permeated by the same classical ethos and displayed the same linguistic field. These authors should also have a place in the modernisation of education due to their educational value.

A number of rediscovered authors who were respected during the classical era in the fields of education and didactics belonged to this rediscovered heritage. *Institutio Oratoria* (*The Orator's Education*) by Quintilian, the educational handbook in ancient times, is illustrative of this. When the humanist Poggio Bracciolini came across a complete text from this in a Swiss monastery, a wave of excitement swept across intellectual Europe. It's true that people were already familiar with large parts of the work, but no one had expected a complete Quintilian any more. The handbook by this great orator from the first century after Christ enjoyed an enormous reputation as a source of knowledge in the field of education, upbringing and mastery of language from the moment that it was rediscovered. Erasmus was also indebted to this text for his own educational works.

Another author wrested from oblivion and also frequently cited by Erasmus is Plutarch (1<sup>st</sup> century AD). His *Ethika* or *Moralia* is a collection of philosophical essays on various subjects, including upbringing and education. These authors' texts were inspiring sources for a radical modernisation of educational and upbringing ideology. At the same time, they were the weapons employed to fight against the existing educational system. New texts, new notions, new ideals – an inspiring world opened up. These were discoveries that led to a sense of optimism. A letter written by Erasmus in 1531 demonstrated the high expectations of a new era. He wrote about a happy period of time in which true piety (*vera pietas*) and pure literary education were actually undergoing a miraculous rebirth (Allen, 1938, nr. 2584).

This sensation of encountering something new, of discovering a new world that is intrinsically different is linked to the emergence of historical awareness. The past is seen as something different from modern times and stripped of its anachronistic veil. Such an approach suggests a perspective where antiquity is considered to be different and in the past. (Chantraine, 1988, P.110). This historical awareness was lacking in the Middle Ages where the past, in relation to the present, was purely seen as a distance in time. This opened the humanists' eyes to strange things, the otherness of the world they were entering. Their experience of strangeness was coupled with enthusiasm and expectations. Through the humanists' discovery of the educational power of the writings from the classical world, humanism expanded from being a literary-scientific movement to a philosophy that asserts that 'it is only the development of the mind that makes a human being a human being, in the conviction that this development was reflected in the ancient Greek and Roman world in a way that was unsurpassed.' (Weiler, 1997, p.11). The Latin author and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) (Deneire & Van Houdt, 2004) provided orientation for the interpretation and content of the concept *humanitas* and *studia humaniora*.

The concept of *humanitas* is layered. It has a moral definition, which refers to what it is that really makes a human being a true human being and is therefore

associated with values such as kindness, generosity, friendliness and sensitivity, and constitutes the antithesis of cruelty and ruthlessness. The road to this proceeds via schooling, education and upbringing through the above-mentioned arts that constitute the *studia humanitatis*.

Study of the (heathen) authors leads to the recovery of knowledge and application of the Latin language in its purest, classical form, but study of this literature in its historical context also reveals the moral and intellectual treasures it contains. Study leads to *eruditio* ('refinement', the mind is stripped of its roughness, *ruditas*) and *virtus* (from *vir*, man, virtuousness). Erasmus exercised a great deal of influence on the creation and propagation of this new mentality. Through his works and text editions 'the classical mind became prevalent' (Huizinga, 1950, p.39). This mind should also permeate education.

### 3.2. Reform and reformation

For Erasmus as a Christian – he was once ordained as a priest - this classically oriented humanism coincided with the ideology for reformation of the church in his day. He saw this church as a bureaucratic institution of power in which the power of the gospels was being pushed aside by formal theology and ostentation. It needed to focus once again on the period of its origins, the early church where the gospels had played a key role and Church Fathers such as Augustine and Hieronymus had steered the church along the purest lines. In the end, this call for *renovatio* of the church manifested itself most forcefully outside the church, thus during the Reformation. But this call also struck a sympathetic chord within the church. Erasmus himself was conscious of not wanting to break with the mother church of his day, but he was a confident supporter and a prominent champion of a 'reform movement' within the church and society. He saw the way ahead as a return to an evangelical Christianity. Ecclesiastical doctrines were not at the top of his priorities, particularly if they were associated with all kinds of theological or dogmatic refinements. What he himself professed and continued to hold up to others as an objective was a life of genuine piety and following Christ. He himself spoke of life in accordance with the 'philosophy of Christ' (*philosophia Christi*), so clearly evident in the gospels and in the apostolic letters. Erasmus saw it as his first task to make this learning as easy and as accessible as possible. 'For this reason, each person must instil in his mind the objective on which he needs to focus. Because there is only one objective and that is Christ and His purest teachings', said Erasmus (Erasmus, 2010, no. 858). This is where we encounter the second inner layer of the 'humanist' Erasmus.

Erasmus' plea for the return to an evangelical Christianity was therefore mainly the result of the ecclesiastical and religious dissension. In the middle of this dissension, he hoped that a return to the Bible itself was the way towards the recovery of unity and the reformation of Christendom and thus of society. In this



perspective, the Bible was the remedy that would banish all evil (Van Veen, 2012, p. 59).

Judging by this, Erasmus can best be characterised as a 'Christian humanist' or as a 'biblical humanist'. This Christian humanism, of which the *philosophia Christi* is a core element, is also a significant element in Erasmus' educational work. For example, this is evident in his comment in the prologue of his etiquette book *De Civilitate (On Good Manners)* that the most important step in the education and upbringing of children was 'to sow the seeds of piety in their young hearts' (De Landtsheer & Breij, 2006, p. 9) or that the education and upbringing of children was 'God's most agreeable work' (Sperna Weiland, 1992, p.112). It was his ambition to integrate the *philosophia Christi* into education. This is why Erasmus also intended education and upbringing to include *docta pietas*, learned piety, in addition to *virtus* and *eruditio*; learned piety is ingrained in the *sacrae litterae*, the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers. In short, this is the broader context in which Erasmus, as a Christian and as a humanist, formulated and developed his educational and didactic ideology.

Humanists such as Erasmus wanted to achieve literary, cultural and also religious reform through education and upbringing. Humanism and education belong together: 'the *passio docendi* (the passion to teach) was so ingrained in many, very many humanists from northern parts that they wanted to look for the true newness of humanism in the field of education' (Bot, 1955, p.9). Many humanists were indeed educationalists, either by being practically involved in education as teachers at Latin schools, or by exercising great influence upon it through their writings. Erasmus was the most influential member of this latter group.

#### Study questions

1. Erasmus' modern educational concept was strongly influenced by contemporary developments such as the rediscovery of the social world and way of thinking in the classical era and by the religious uncertainty in his day. How did both factors affect Erasmus' educational concept?
2. Can you see, just like Erasmus, any opportunities to connect contemporary developments in social or religious issues with your perspective on the contents of or the provision of education?

## 4. Theme

Formation of a Christian committed character – moral and religious education

The primary focus of Erasmus' ideas on upbringing and education was the role of the teacher and his relationship with his pupils. In the elaboration of this theme, he brought together various issues. His negative experiences with teachers in his youth affected him deeply as a boy with an oversensitive nature. His letters and treatises show that he was unable to forget this. His religious convictions, his *philosophia Christi*, also came to the forefront in this. The gentleness and love with which Jesus taught and supported his disciples were illustrative of Erasmus himself – in fact in every educational context (Sperna Weiland, 1992, p. 106). But his discovery of classical educationalists, particularly Quintilian's *The Orator's Education*, also shaped his ideology. For example, *Learning to Study* is mainly based on the first and tenth book of Quintilian (De Landtsheer & Breij, 2006, p. 393). Moreover, the classical *humanitas* concept of the Latin author Cicero, who was adored by humanists, showed the way to another relationship between the teacher and pupil than that experienced by Erasmus himself. *Humanitas* also had to be a characteristic of the teacher. Erasmus' optimistic view of mankind was fundamental to his perspective on this relationship.

He felt that education and upbringing had potential, not only because of the '*humanitas*-idea' that he came across in his classical sources, but also on the basis of his theological view of mankind; children were not born, but educated, was a typical phraseology he used which demonstrated his conviction (De Landtsheer & Breij, 2006, p. 76). But this possibility was again dependent on a mutual affection between the teacher and pupil. His own experiences as a teacher, not as a pupil, contributed to his conviction that a teacher who knows his profession and who knows how to deal with his pupils is essential.

Erasmus gained experience as a teacher by giving private lessons to pupils and students when he was a theology student at Paris University. Erasmus was quite unequivocal about this in a letter to one of his former private pupils in 1497; he advised him that 'the choice of an excellent, well-educated teacher' should be his first priority. 'Because it would be impossible for someone who has not been taught well himself to teach others well. Once you have found him, make sure that he becomes a father to you and that you love him as a son. Justice imposes this on us, because we should be equally thankful to those who teach us how to live well as to those who brought us into being. Moreover, mutual affection is of vital importance to learning itself. A teacher of the humanities who is not your friend at the same time would be of little benefit' (Erasmus, 2004, pp. 130-131). About twenty years later, in 1515, he gave meaning once again to what he understood to be the exemplary art of being a teacher. This was in a letter to a teacher who had become stuck in a rut: 'Teaching is an office that is very similar to governing. Do you really think it to be a "low" profession to imbue your fellow citizens immediately at a young age with the good letters and with Christ, and to

give such good and honourable men back to the fatherland? (...) This task requires an honourable, untainted man who fulfils his duty even without payment. A large salary and the prospect of a prominent position could entice any criminal to this office. My dear Witz, you will add dignity to your office on the basis of your talents, however dull in the eyes of the people, but beautiful in the eyes of Christ' (Erasmus, 2006, p. 203 e.v.).

It is obvious that Erasmus highly valued education that cultivated young people both morally and religiously and made them instrumental in building society. In the eyes of Erasmus, this high ideal required an art of teaching in which the outlines of this became visible. With the help of the source text, you will be challenged to draw outlines that are even more well defined; how can a teacher, according to Erasmus, create a relationship, with knowledge of the child, that makes education productive?

#### Study question

3. To what extent (and also explain why) is Erasmus an example for you as a teacher or teacher leader? If this appears to be the case, work this out specifically in terms of your current teacher leader role?

## 5. Professional biography

The man who would grow to be one of the most famous figures of his century was an illegitimate child, the son of a priest. This is probably the reason why Erasmus himself was somewhat secretive about his birth and the first years of his life. He himself said that he was born in 1467, but it could also have been 1466 or 1469.

During the first years of his life, Erasmus attended the Latin school in Gouda and subsequently the famous school run by the clergymen of the Sint Lebuinus Church in Deventer. There he came into contact with one of the first humanists in the Low Countries, Alexander Hegius, who was rector there from 1483-89 and who was the first to include Greek in the curriculum. But just before this flourishing development, Erasmus left Deventer because of the outbreak of a plague epidemic. During his stay at the boarding school run by the Modern Devotees, he was introduced to the classical era in a purer form. Erasmus also once heard the humanist Agricola speaking in Deventer, which made a deep impression on him.

In 1486, Erasmus entered the Emmaüs monastery in Stein near Gouda, under pressure from his guardians (his parents had died). There, he laid the foundations of his development into a literary humanist and, at the same time, evolved into a Christian humanist. In a letter to a fellow brother, he wrote that he had made a serious decision 'from now on not to write anything that did not spread a sense of sacredness and holiness'.

In 1495, Erasmus succeeded in going to Paris to study theology. He stayed in the Collège Montaigu, where he was deeply disappointed by the education and the strictness. In order to earn some income, Erasmus gave lessons to the young sons of the nobility. At the invitation of one of them, he went to England where he met two great figures, the theologian John Colet and the lawyer and philosopher, Thomas More. Largely because of Colet, Erasmus set to work seriously on the recovery of divinity in all its purity. John Colet was an idealistic theologian, committed to the necessity for a resurgence of Christianity. Erasmus took this objective over to a large extent, but wanted first of all to master ancient Greek very well. In this way, he hoped to penetrate the pure sources of Christianity, the gospels and the letters from Paul.

At the beginning of 1500, Erasmus left England. In 1502, he stayed in the university city of Leuven. Here he came in contact with the publishing world. Erasmus' life continued in the same fashion; he was constantly on the road – the Netherlands, France, England, Italy, Switzerland – without a permanent place of residence, studying, publishing texts, corresponding and working on his own writings. Within this stable pattern of a restless academic existence, there were regular occurrences that left a permanent stamp on the rest of his life. One of these was the discovery he made in 1504, in the library of a monastery just

outside Leuven; he found Lorenzo Valla's textual criticism of the text of the Latin Bible, the Vulgate. This discovery eventually led to an edition of the New Testament in Greek. This appeared in 1516 in combination with a revised translation of the Latin Bible: the *Novum Instrumentum*, Erasmus' *opus magnum*.

In 1506, Erasmus had the opportunity to visit the cradle of humanism – Italy. In Turin, he gained recognition through the award of a doctorate in theology. After Turin came Venice, where he came into contact with Aldus Manutius, who ran a printing establishment of international stature and who published a comprehensive version of Erasmus' *Adagia*, (*The Adages of Erasmus*), a collection of remarkable and informative – didactic – sayings by classical authors. It was one of Erasmus' most popular works in his time. Via Venice, he also visited Rome, where the lifestyle of the Papal Court affected him deeply; in spite of his great love of the classics, Erasmus found the mixture of Christian and heathen elements repugnant. The *belle-lettres* were supposed to speak particularly of Christ, not idols.

In 1509, Erasmus decided to return to England. During the return journey across the Alps, he composed the text that is now known as his greatest work of art, *Lof der Zotheid* (In Praise of Folly). In England, he was in close contact with his friend John Colet and he was involved in the founding of his school for boys, St. Paul's School (1509). He wrote two didactic works for this, the *De copia verborum ac rerum* (Foundations of the Abundant Style – 1512, a style handbook) and *De ratione studii* (1512, Learning to Study). At the same time, he taught ancient Greek and theology at the University of Cambridge.

Basel was the next port of call which was of significance in the life of Erasmus. Here he built up a relationship with the printer Johann Froben, moved into his house and enjoyed a stay in an academic environment. This man also published his *Novum Testamentum* in 1516 and the *Institutio Principis Christiani* (*The Education of a Christian Prince*), an educational work intended for the young Prince Charles V, the future ruler of the Netherlands.

During the years 1517 to 1521, Erasmus stayed in Brabant, most of the time in Leuven, with trips from time to time to Antwerp, Brugge and Basel, where he went to supervise the printing of his works.

The confrontation with Luther and the Reformation was a tragic episode in Erasmus' life. He was then 50 years old. It was his intention to remain neutral and by holding on to the 'philosophy of Christ' to move the parties towards conciliation. He did not succeed in this. Erasmus was forced to take sides in the conflict. He did this in an essay in which he addressed the attack on the most essential difference in faith between the two of them: the free will (*De libero arbitrio*, 1524). After Luther's response with *De servo arbitrio* (*Bondage of the Will*), reconciliation was out of the question. People either blamed Erasmus for the entire Reformation or blamed him for being too weak to support the

Reformation publicly. The tragic side of consciously choosing this middle position was that Erasmus was eventually rejected by both camps.

When the Reformation also reached Basel in 1529, Erasmus took refuge in Freiburg where he even bought a house and where he worked on his many writings and collections of correspondence in peace and quiet, surrounded by his books. During this period, he distanced himself more and more from the issue of the Reformation. In 1535, he returned to Basel, where the atmosphere had calmed down. During the following autumn, he was mainly bedridden; working was difficult. On 12 February 1536, Erasmus drew up his will. On 18 June 1536, he wrote that he would rather that his life had ended elsewhere: 'If only Brabant was a little closer!' On 12 July he died. His last words were – not in Latin but in Dutch – : 'Dear God'. And so this is how the life of the 'Prince of Humanists' ended. He placed himself in the service of his ideology by opening up the *bonae* and *sacrae litterae* through education and study to point the way to a better world (Desiderius Erasmus, 2018).

#### Study questions

4. It appears from this biography of Erasmus that his academic work often emerged from a religious intention. Can you name a few examples of this?
5. How are your religious intentions visible in your work? Give at least one example.

## 6. Source text

The source text consists of fragments from *De opvoeding van kinderen* (The Education of Children, *De pueris statim ac liberaliter institutendos*). The essay is an 'excellent example of Erasmus' educational and ethical single-mindedness' (De Landtsheer & Breij, 2006, p. 394). He dedicated it to the thirteen-year-old son of the Duke of Cleves. The draft dates from the beginning of the sixteenth century, but Erasmus elaborated on it further and had it printed by Froben in Basel in 1529.

I know the excuse will be brought forward that the fatigue of studying might have a detrimental effect on the health of a young and delicate child. We should of course take precautions to ensure the good health of our children. Still, it is absurd to fear the effects of studying but to ignore the greater dangers of gluttony, which harms young minds no less than young bodies, or the dangers posed by certain types of food and drink that are not suitable for children of this age. Of course we should still see to it that our children's studies will cost them as little fatigue as possible, for fatigue means wasted effort. Therefore we should not confront them with too great a quantity and variety of material, but select only what is good and suitable for their age, which is attracted by appealing and easily mastered material rather than by recondite studies. If a gentle method of instruction is used, the process of education will resemble play more than work. Young children do not as yet appreciate the benefits of profit, prestige, and pleasure that education will bring them; so we must resort to stratagems. A teacher can expect success in the classroom if he displays the qualities of gentleness and kindness and also possesses the skill and ingenuity to devise various means of making the studies pleasant and keeping the child from feeling any strain. Nothing is more harmful than an instructor whose conduct causes his students to take an intense dislike to their studies before they are sufficiently mature to appreciate them for their own sake. A prerequisite for learning is that the teacher must be liked. Gradually, after first enjoying learning because of their instructor, children will come to like their teacher for the sake of learning. Just as we cherish many gifts because they were given to us by those whom we consider our dearest friends, so also children who are still too young for any intellectual appreciation take pleasure in school because of their fondness for the teacher.

I knew a man of distinguished reputation, but whose cruelty towards his students was insatiable, even though he had teachers who used the whip vigorously. It was his conviction that this was the only way to humble high spirits and check youthful waywardness. He would never enjoy his meal before his flock of students without bringing the drama to a fitting conclusion, and after dinner was over he would have one or two of the

40 boys brought forward to be flogged. Even boys who had done no wrong would be beaten from time to time — this, no doubt, to prepare them for the blows to come. I was once sitting beside him when, as usual, he summoned a boy from his dinner. The lad was only ten years old, I believe, and had only just left his home and his mother and had entered the school. My host told me by way of introduction that the child's -  
50 mother was a most devout woman who had warmly recommended her son to him. Next, in order to have a convenient pretext for punishing the boy, he began to rail at him for some act of wanton misbehaviour, even though there was not the least evidence for this in the boy. He then signalled to the prefect of the college, whom he himself had appointed and who had the appropriate nickname of 'the lackey,' to start flogging the boy. The man threw him to the floor and began to beat away as if the child had committed an act of sacrilege. Once or twice the theologian interjected, 'That is enough now, that is enough,' but the prefect-  
60 executioner, fired by enthusiasm, turned a deaf ear and continued to discharge his brutal task until the boy was almost on the point of fainting. The man of the cloth then turned to me and commented, 'He did not do anything to deserve this, but he simply had to be humbled' — yes, 'humbled' was the word he used. Would anyone dream of training a slave or even a donkey in such a manner? A thoroughbred horse responds better to stroking and clicking of the tongue than to whips and spurs; if he is treated too roughly, he becomes disobedient and prone to kick, bite, and jib. An ox that is goaded too much is likely to shake off his yoke and attack his tormentor. You should handle a character of high mettle as you would a lion's whelp. Skill, not force, is what will tame an elephant.  
70 The most ferocious animal can be subdued by gentle treatment, while the tamest can be roused to anger by excessive harshness.

Returning to my main theme, I maintain that nothing is more damaging to young children than constant exposure to beatings. When corporal punishment is applied too harshly the more spirited children are driven to rebellion while the more apathetic ones are numbed into despair. If it is too frequently used, the body will gradually grow inured to beatings and the mind will become unresponsive to what it hears. Nor should sharp words of admonition be used too often. Any medicine wrongly administered aggravates rather than relieves the disease; or if it is taken too often it gradually loses its force and has the effect only of an unpalatable and unwholesome substance which has to be swallowed.

Our rod should be kind words of guidance; words of reproof are sometimes needed, but they should be filled with gentleness rather than any bitterness. These should be our instruments of discipline; only in this way can our children be properly raised at home and attain moral wisdom, and not be forced to beg from their neighbours advice on how to conduct their lives. The



80 philosopher Lycon tells us that there are two sharp spurs that will rouse a child's natural talents, shame and praise. Shame is fear of just criticism and praise is the foster-mother of all accomplishments; these must be our instruments for bringing out our children's natural abilities. As for the stick with which you are supposed to bruise your child's sides, even here I might make a suggestion, if you wish: 'Relentless toil overcomes all,' as the supreme poet Virgil expresses it. So let us then constantly watch, encourage, and press our children, never ceasing to repeat, order, and exhort; this must be our rod of chastisement. Our children should first of all be made to love moral goodness and sound learning and to hate crudity and ignorance. They  
90 should hear some men praised for their goodness, others condemned for their evil. They should learn numerous examples of men who, thanks to their wisdom, attained great glory, wealth, honour, and prestige, and as a contrast, also examples of men who, through their dissolute conduct and total ignorance, brought upon themselves dishonour, contempt, poverty and utter ruin; such an approach represents a rod of correction more worthy of Christians and followers of the gentle Jesus.

The instructor, I agree, must show restraint in his kindness; otherwise familiarity will breed contempt and destroy all shame and respect.

100 It is also beneficial if the prospective teacher deliberately adopts a fatherly attitude towards his pupils; in this way his students will undertake their studies with great enthusiasm, while he himself finds less tedium in his work. Love will overcome almost any difficult challenge. The old saying has it that like rejoices in like:<sup>29</sup> so the teacher must, as it were, become a child again and thus win the affection of his students.

110 Just as food and drink introduced slowly in small quantities will give the right nourishment for young bodies, so also young minds exposed to a congenial programme of studies that is assimilated in gradual stages and intermingled with play will soon adapt themselves to a more substantial course of learning. This can be done without any weariness since the slow process of accumulation is free from any sense of fatigue and thus can produce the most impressive results.

120 There are those, however, who expect boys to grow into old men within the shortest period of time, not taking into consideration the limitations to which the early years of life are subject, and without measuring the intellectual capacities of the young against their own. So they exert relentless pressure on students, demand a full load of work, and wrinkle their foreheads when a pupil does not meet their expectations; they act as if they were dealing with adults, forgetting that they too were once children. How much more understanding is the advice given by Pliny the Younger to a rather strict schoolmaster: 'Remember that your pupil is still only a youth and that you were once young yourself.' Indeed, many act so

cruelly towards their students that one would think that they had forgotten that both they themselves and their pupils were human beings.

130 You will now ask me to explain what type of learning is suitable for a young mind and can be instilled into small children. First of all, there must be training in the use of the classical languages; this is a skill which children will acquire without any effort, whereas adults will scarcely accomplish it even with the greatest application. As I have already pointed out, children are attracted to this study because of their natural urge to imitate, an instinct of which we discover traces in starlings and parrots also. Can you imagine anything more appealing than the fables of the ancient authors? The teacher must, of course, be careful in his choice of subject-matter and put before his students only what he finds to be especially agreeable, relevant, and attractive material, which flowers, so to speak, with promise.

140 For youth is the springtime of life, abounding with sweetly smiling flowers and brightly verdant fields, followed by the harvest time of full manhood when the ripened crops are gathered in. As it is foolish to search for a ripe grape in spring or a rose in autumn, so also the instructor must observe what is appropriate for each stage of life. Gaiety and charm — these are the qualities that belong to youth. In fact, dullness and harshness ought to be entirely banished from all study. The teacher who gives the kind of instruction we have been discussing should not be harsh and demanding; he should be conscientious and persistent rather than disposed to taking extreme measures. When such persistence is applied with moderation and attractively seasoned with variety, when, in short, the teaching takes such a shape that any impression of drudgery is avoided and the pupils come to see everything as part of a game, then it will win their acceptance.

150 I have now come to the stage of my argument where I shall briefly explain how love of study may be instilled in children — a subject which I have already touched upon in part. As I have said, through practice we acquire painlessly the ability to speak. The art of reading and writing comes next; this involves some tedium, which can be relieved, however, by an expert teacher who spices his instruction with pleasant inducement

## Study questions

### Close reading and reflection

6. This text offers the essence of Erasmus' didactic and educational concept in a condensed form. If you read this text carefully, which of the elements in it would be important to Erasmus in creating a stimulating educational and didactic climate in the classroom?
7. Within this more general picture, make a precise assessment of how the relationship between the teacher and the pupil should ideally be, according to Erasmus.
8. Then work out how the relationship of authority between the teacher and the pupil should be, according to Erasmus, particularly regarding the question of correction and reprimand.
9. Compare the results of the previous tasks with your own learning experiences as a pupil in your own context during primary education (4-12 years). Which elements do you recognise, and which not? Which ones would you promote as a teacher leader, and which of them would you not promote?
10. Think about and note down how you, as a teacher, would implement what you see as positive elements in specific terms.

## 7. Influence and the continual effect in later times

a. The continual effect of Erasmus' range of ideas can scarcely be underestimated. As 'Prince of the Humanists' his writings could count on a wide reception. As the 'engine of humanism', Erasmus played a significant role in the advent and development of the study of the *studia humanitatis*. These form the basis of what are now referred to as the 'humanities', academic disciplines that study aspects of human society and culture, as distinguished from the mainly empirical approaches of the natural sciences.

The painting below is one of the first illustrative sources of the early reception of Erasmus' educational ideas.



This painting of a young boy – his age is stated top right – is by Jan van Scorel, 1495-1562, a contemporary of Erasmus, and dates from 1531. One may assume that the pupil in the painting, otherwise unknown, attended a Latin school.

You see a student who has just used his quill to write a line on the sheet of paper he holds in his hand. It bears a Latin inscription, which can be seen in mirror image through the paper: '*Oia (omnia) dat dominus non habet ergo (mi(n)us,*' meaning 'The Lord gives all, He possesses no less for it'. Here, this student brings an aspect of the new learning into practice, as recommended by Erasmus in his essay *Leren studeren (Learning to Study)* from 1511; in this Erasmus gives a number of practical tips for learning sayings by heart: "What I am now about to say is a detail, but still worth considering and it will help you in no small way in things you should know, but which are difficult to remember (...). You should note down such matters in a short and concise way on schematic cards that you hang on the wall of your room, where they are always in sight, even when you are doing something else. You should also write down certain pithy, concise remarks, such as anecdotes, proverbs, aphorisms ... You can also attach some of them to doors and walls or even to windows; in this way, you can see all your reminders constantly and everywhere.' At the same time, learning Latin by internalising moral and religious knowledge in this way illustrates a core aspect of Christian-humanistic education as recommended by Erasmus. The same goes for the aphorism at the bottom of the painting, also in Latin. It reads, '*Quis dives? Qui nil cupit. Quis pauper? Avar(us)*': 'Who is rich? He who covets nothing. Who is poor? The miser'. This saying comes from Erasmus' *Colloquia*, a book that was extremely successful and, at the time Scorel produced this painting, had been reprinted more than forty times. The *Colloquia* also combined the learning of Latin with wise, moralising written texts in a direct style. These wise words were intended to guide the scholar on his journey through life.

b. The humanistic ambition to support 'humanity' and to achieve a harmonious society through literary studies implies a great emphasis on upbringing and education. This emphasis, with Erasmus as the spearhead, had an effect. The printing of his treatises on education is proof of this. New editions of his book on education and upbringing *Etiquette (De civilitate, On Good Manners)* from 1530 appeared in the same year and, soon after this, translations into the vernacular were produced; the Dutch edition appeared in 1546. A large number of books on etiquette appeared from 1550, based on this book. The book was written by a bible-humanist, but nevertheless immediately gained a position within Protestantism, both with the Lutherans and the Calvinists. These books were written in a question and answer form just like the Catechism and children had to learn them by heart in class (Wellewendheid, 2018). After 1600, but also in the eighteenth and even in the nineteenth century, popular editions of etiquette books based on Erasmus' book were sold to a wide range of people. Hundreds of thousands of copies and perhaps even millions of these small and cheap editions were printed. Not only children read them, but also large numbers of people who saw these books as a kind of mini encyclopaedia.

c. If we look at the book from which the source text came, *Over de opvoeding van kinderen (The Education of Children)*, then this work was not so widely

distributed as his etiquette book (De Landtsheer & Breij, 2006, p. 395). There were about ten editions known about before 1540, but later on separate editions no longer appeared (Sperna Weiland, 1992, p. 36). Nevertheless, it had a strong impact on educational and upbringing practices (Groenendijk, 2017, p. 109 e.v; Exalto, 2017, p. 129 e.v.). As is the case with Erasmus' *Etiquetteboekje*, works by seventeenth-century reformed clergymen and other writers about education in the Protestant Netherlands show that they were strongly influenced by Erasmus' ideas on education. They had an optimistic view of the moral and religious education of the young child, just as Erasmus did. They even compared the soul of a child with a *white, unwritten sheet of paper*. People also adopted other fundamental ideas of Erasmus without any reservations. These included a heavy emphasis on the need to start with education as early as possible and an accentuation on bringing them up to be virtuous, relying on the malleability of the young child, also when it related to religious education and training. It was imperative to start educating children early on so that the inherent inclination towards evil, characteristic of the Calvinistic portrayal of mankind and children, could be restricted. Education and upbringing involved habituation, following good examples, avoiding physical punishments, unless it was unavoidable, and a child-friendly, gentle approach (*liberaliter*) etc. It is worth noting that Erasmus was declared a 'persona non grata' within orthodox Protestant and reformative circles in the twentieth century; this was therefore in stark contrast to the period mentioned above. This rift was mainly due to the annexation of Erasmus by modern humanism.

d. The influence of Erasmus was also great in sixteenth-century education in the Latin schools and the city schools (roughly comparable to our secondary school, but attended at a younger age). This applied both to the content of the curriculum and to the educational ideology that was associated with the educational setting. Education was now being designed along humanistic lines. This meant that it was not only a question of didactic modernisation with pupils using textbooks produced by Erasmus to master Latin in its classical form. It was also particularly evident from the emphasis on the morally religious education that was interwoven with the texts that people were reading such as *De Officiis (On Duties)* by Cicero, the *Colloquia (Colloquies)* by Erasmus and (on Sundays) the Letters of Paul and the new translation of the gospels by Erasmus. During the course of the sixteenth century, education inspired by humanism was subjected to the influence of the Reformation. The new religion laid a greater emphasis on catechesis and religious education (where Latin was the official language) and the teachers had to be good Protestants, but the achievements of humanism largely survived. The saying above the door of the former Latin school in Gouda illustrates this: 'in order to be of support, adornment and a source of joy in life, Greek and Latin shape the still uncultured mind here' (Hage, 2017, p. 113).

The present (categorical) *gymnasia* (grammar schools) are carrying on the tradition of the Latin school. Before the twentieth century, the system of

gymnasiums was a widespread feature of the educational system throughout many countries of central, north, eastern and southern Europe. These schools concentrate not only on academic subjects, but on producing well-rounded individuals, meaning that physical education and religion or ethics are compulsory, even in non-denominational schools which are prevalent. So this is where humanistic education exists in a watered-down form just as Erasmus envisaged, albeit that in most cases the religious component has disappeared and classical education runs parallel with humanism in a modern sense (Gymnasium, 2018).

The humanistic tradition which up until the present day has manifested itself most clearly in the education given in the gymnasium school has also continued to exist in education outside this system with variable effects. This applies even more to Christian humanism as represented by Erasmus, because from this perspective, education is not only focused on imparting substantive knowledge, but also on cultivating the inner soul, the dimension of the heart. The educationalist in this tradition is not purely focused on qualifications, the learning of knowledge, skills and the understanding to be able to achieve something with this. He focuses just as much on the dimensions of socialisation, imparting standards and values for the personal education of young people (Kalkman, 2016). These concepts have their equivalents in Erasmian terminology of *pietas*, *eruditio* and *virtus*. This educational ideology implies a *humanitas* context in the relationship between a teacher and his pupils. A report by the Dutch Education Council in 2011 entitled *Onderwijs vormt (Development through Education)* emphasised the current focus on this aspect of education. The following quotation from this report is characteristic of this: 'Children and young people need a broad transfer of culture, including knowledge of traditions and morals' ( *Advies Onderwijs vormt*, 2011, p.7).

#### Study question

11. The influence of this educational ideology advocated by Erasmus is evident to this day. To what extent does this educational ideology have a place in your educational context? Would you like to have more room for it?

## 8. Update

### The educational relationship

"Where I work we use caning as a method of punishment", says a young teacher from a Chinese primary school in Kuala Lumpur, who would prefer to remain anonymous. "If someone has failed to do his homework several times, has arrived too late or is cheeky, for example." The cane used is made from rattan and has a diameter of one centimetre and is about one metre long. "We only use it to beat hands and buttocks. And three times, one after the other, that is the legal maximum." Not all schools still use this method. "But our school is a Chinese school", the teacher emphasised, "this is part of the culture, the usual way to exercise discipline. Beatings with the cane have always worked, so why should we change anything?"(Tjoa, 2013).

In the South Korean education system, physical punishment is also not unusual: 'A pupil in group 4 of a primary school was beaten by her teacher 27 times because she gave the wrong answer to a sum. After the mother had placed a photo of her daughter with bruises on the Internet, there were fierce discussions about physical punishment in which supporters and opponents took part (Hyejin Kim, 2009). One of the reactions was that "we (namely, in South Korea) should be careful about calling the physical punishment our children receive at school child abuse, as has been the case in other countries. We must not look at our schools from a Western point of view. If we look at other European countries and the United States, where there is no corporal punishment, then these countries have different rules at school". "But if you say that physical punishment must disappear, then the ideas of teachers and parents as well as the educational system would all have to change".

The use of corporal punishment has been prohibited in the Netherlands since 1854; it is inconceivable in the Netherlands to imagine that you might be beaten by your teacher, and certainly not with a cane. However, this does not mean to say that physical punishment has completely disappeared from the Dutch educational system since that time; halfway through the twentieth century the custom was not rejected in principle in the *Maandblad voor praktische katholieke opvoeding* (Monthly magazine for practical Catholic education): "I would not dare to give a negative answer to this question. Delivering a slap, boxing the ears, or smacking a bottom at the right moment can have indisputable results. The seriousness of warnings or reprimands does not always sink in with some children. A physical punishment does appear to have results in such cases; the child wakes up and realises that the educator is serious"(Van Overveld, 2017).

So this shows that Erasmus was an early advocate of the notion that physical punishments are impermissible in an educational relationship. Erasmus urged the abolition of this method of punishment – unless there's no other way. Erasmus strongly disapproved of this approach because 'beating hardens the



body against blows just as it hardens the soul against the words' (Sperna Weiland, 1992, p.106). He totally rejected an educational climate in which order is based on fear of punishment, because it closes a child's mind to real learning.

He combined the rejection of physical punishments with a plea for a preventive approach in which the teacher-pupil relationship is based on affection and where the subject matter offered generates intrinsic motivation and involvement. In the Dutch educational system, the approach towards pupils is not based on a hierarchical or authoritarian relationship, let alone the threat of physical punishment. Driestar educatief recently formulated this guiding principle in a full-page advertisement with the statement 'Motivate pupils in a positive way, not by scolding them' (Driestar educatief, 2018). The source text shows in more detail how Erasmus envisaged this process of forming a relationship. The core question is what qualities this requires from a teacher in various cultural contexts; and if correction does appear to be necessary, how can this be more clearly defined in line with Erasmus' views on education?

#### Study question

12. What are your experiences of 'behavioural correction' in the context of education in your country? To what extent do they relate to Erasmus' vision? What would your stance be in relation to this educational issue?

## 9. Core concepts

**Pietas**, in Roman religion, the personification of a respectful and faithful attachment to gods, country, and relatives, especially parents. This concept also falls within the scope of humanism and therefore means more than piety. For Erasmus, piety was closely connected to the *philosophia Christi*\*

**Eruditio** - A scholar is erudite (Latin *eruditus*) when instruction and reading followed by digestion and contemplation have effaced all rudeness (*ex*=out and *rudis*= raw), that is to say smoothed away all raw, untrained incivility. Erudition is the depth, polish and breadth that education confers. The study of the humanities was the road to this objective.

**Virtus** - virtue is moral excellence. A virtue is a trait or quality that is deemed to be morally good and thus is valued as a foundation of principle and good moral being. The four classic cardinal virtues are temperance, prudence, courage, and justice. Christianity derives the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love (charity) from 1 Corinthians. Together these make up the seven virtues.

**Philosophia Christi** – Erasmus explained that the core of this is ‘our understanding, that all our hope is placed in God, who freely gives us all things through Jesus his son, that we were redeemed by his death and engrafted through baptism with his body, that we might be dead to the desires of this world and live by his teaching and example...that we may ever advance from one virtue to another, yet in such a way that we claim nothing for ourselves, but ascribe any good we do to God’. (Ep. 1039: 245–54)

**Bonae litterae** – ‘good letters’, the *bonae litterae* are more than a study of the classics. They give access to erudition and they represent a certain refinement and attitude to life. Erasmus felt that one could become a better person by studying the *bonae litterae*.

**Sacrae litterae** – ‘sacred texts’, especially the study of the Bible and writings traditional within the Church, in particular of the Church Fathers such as Augustine and Hieronymus et al.

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'Over de opvoeding' (On Education) has been published in English with a detailed commentary in volume 26 of the *Collected Works of Erasmus* series: Sowards, J. K. (ed.) (1985). *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and educational writings. De recta pronuntiatio*. (Collected Works of Erasmus, vol. 26). Toronto, Canada: Toronto University Press.

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### 13. Suggestions for dealing with a case

#### Case – Lydia

Example of reprimand from *Wijs me de weg. Mogelijkheden voor een christelijke opvoeding in een post-christelijke samenleving (Show me the way. Possibilities for a Christian education in a post-Christian society)* van W. Ter Horst.

The example relates to the problems surrounding reprimand. Ter Horst describes it roughly as follows:

'Towards the end of the morning, the girls in group 8 had a quarrel in the playground. It was about a birthday party to which some had been invited and some hadn't. They were extremely upset and also let it show. One word had led to another and then Lydia had said to Alberta, a girl from Suriname: "I don't want to have anything more to do with you, you filthy, fucking nigger. Go back to your monkey country, you don't belong here".

This was followed by a lot of scratching, biting, pulling and shoving and in the end Lydia, battered and bedraggled, was taken home by two supporters. It took a long time before it became clear exactly what had happened, because the outraged ladies had called out in unison that 'the blackies were the ones who had started the fight without any reason'.

The teacher then visited Lydia's mother who told him that she had become terribly angry. She had pushed her daughter into her room after giving her a few sharp slaps, had slammed the door behind her and then burst into tears.

How would you assess the behaviour of Lydia's mother in this case? Would you have dealt with it differently and, if so, how and on what basis?

Imagine that the teacher had not spoken to the mother, but had seen the girls fighting and swearing in the playground and had then directed them inside. Lydia's discriminatory remark was a fact – how should he correct or punish this?