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## **Post-Critical Approaches in Educational Research. Towards an Empirical Philosophy of Education.**

Among the tasks of philosophy of education is not only the contemplation of educational questions, the study of the works of educational philosophers, or the articulation of new educational concepts, but also a *reflection on the means and aims of the practice of doing educational research*. Central questions here concern the meaning of conducting educational research, the kind of knowledge that is gained in doing such research, the (conceptual) instruments and tools brought to bear on educational questions, and the significance of educational research for practitioners and society. Recent years have seen a growing interest in ‘post-critical’ approaches in educational philosophy. These post-critical approaches take issue with critical gestures pointing at what goes wrong, claiming that these need to be complemented by alternative post-critical gestures of caring for what deserves to be preserved. What these post-critical gestures share is a concern for the empirical reality of educational situations and practices. The aim of the symposium is to present experiments with these approaches that try to develop philosophical-educational questions drawing on empirical materials (papers 1, 2, and 3). Based on these experiments the symposium will raise questions regarding the epistemology, methodology, and ethics of post-criticality as a research stance (paper 4).

### **Paper 1: Post-Critical Readings of Experimental Literature (Alison Brady)**

In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski (2015) argues that the dominant critical approach in education both overshadows and forecloses other ways to engage with literature. In such contexts, students are praised for seeing ‘through’ the text, and for their critical sensitivity towards inert socio-political discourses therein. On the other hand, scholarly practices that promote passivity, conformity, or disciplined obedience are denigrated for encouraging ‘uncritical’ acquiescence to the authority of the text. Whilst there are many kinds of critique, what many have in common is the assumption that there are always hidden meanings to unearth within a text, and that texts are thus by nature coercive and exclusionary. The critical reader must therefore be vigilant, never allowing themselves to be too easily swayed by what they read. They require a suspicious style of interpretation, premised on *critical distancing* between the reader and the text.

My interest here is not in providing a critique of critique, however. Rather, critique ought to be understood as *one possible* orientation amongst others. Indeed, what are the educative potentials of literature beyond critique? Because critique is so ubiquitous in educational contexts, how do we make room ways of reading that are less suspicious, more affirmative or reparative in nature? How might we think of reading in a way that adds to rather than subtracts from our experience of the world?

Ironically, whilst critique emphasises detached dispositions in readers, as well as the more general sense of guardedness towards what is written, the critic can never fully escape the affective dimensions of absorption and enchantment with a text, despite seeing enchantment as in fact as kind of ‘sorcery’. But rather than seeing this as something to overcome, a post-critical orientation *embraces* attachment, whilst also suggesting that the everyday-scholarly dualism in reading is not as sharp as we might like to think, since both are premised on, and shaped by, an enchantment with the text.

As Macé (2013, p. 213) argues, '[l]iterature does not stand on one side, life on the other'. Rather, it has the capacity to draw us towards different 'promises of existence'. By this she means that literature can enlarge our perceptual possibilities, by building our attentive capacities, drawing our attention to, re-orienting and sharpening our 'tools to apprehend the world' (Macé, 2013, p. 222). As Mace suggests:

Let us venture our readings as we venture a footstep, in the affectionate knowledge that we bring to our reading something of our task of existence, the methods and forms that make up our way of life, in the nuance of an ordinary, but always reinvented gesture.

Since literature can give us the means to sketch out new possibilities for ourselves – in short, to *see* ourselves and the world in richer ways - the process of reading is not merely instrumentally valuable, but *existentially* so.

This view of literature is radically distinct from the critical understanding, or what Macé (2013, p. 224) calls the 'narratological vision of reading', which sees reading primarily as a process of deciphering. The post-critical approach, rather, points to the educative potential of literature to take us beyond 'troubling' the world towards facing it with something more akin to generosity and care. To give an example, let's turn to Calvino's experimental fiction, *Invisible Cities*.

On the surface, *Invisible Cities* consists of the accounts of Marco Polo who, at the behest of Kublai Khan, is tasked with describing his vast empire. The text is 'framed' by exchanges between the Khan and Marco, sandwiched between Marco's imaginative recollections of cities he has encountered. Each city belongs to a specific category – memory, desire, continuous, hidden – and when one looks at the *Table of Contents*, we can see that these correspond to a geometric pattern: a bridge, perhaps, which is hinted at by a separate conversation between the two characters. This pattern is only visible when one looks *outside* of the text, however – it isn't explicitly 'felt' when one is engrossed in Marco's strange, wonderful accounts. And yet, in attempting to discover a 'keystone' that would resolve the ambiguity in Marco's descriptions, both the Khan and critical readers of the text have focused on deciphering this pattern.

One such 'keystone' taken up by critics is the idea that Marco *isn't* describing actual cities, but is pointing to the hidden aspects of his *own*. He described the city of Isaura as 'moving entirely upward' and Amarilla has 'no walls, no ceilings, no floors'. Argia has earth instead of air - and if you put your ear to the ground at night, 'you can sometimes hear a door slam'. In reading Venice *into* these descriptions as the 'hidden code' one must unearth, there is perhaps a sense of superiority on behalf of the (critical) reader, and indeed, a sense of certainty and relief that the ambiguity has been overcome. But by decoding the text in line with a pre-specified clue (one that is later retracted in the text), to what extent are other uses of the text and other perceptual possibilities shut out?

In what sense do these peculiarities of the cities described in some way capture *all* of the cities we could possibly inhabit, both now and in the future? Amarilla, a city of slums and camps, where no permanent structure exists except for the intermingling of its inhabitants? Isaura, a city submerged in water, where our only viable option is to build upwards? Argia capturing the stifling humidity that can characterise being in a city? Cities that each have their own unique and strange features, bearing no resemblance to *any* city imaginable and yet, remarkably, *every* city – if we look a little closer. By embracing the ambiguity of *Invisible Cities* rather than shutting it down through decoding some clue that would unlock its ultimate textual unity, a post-critical approach would allow this text to invite an enriched sense of world

around us. This gives us, as Macé (2013) discusses, new possibilities of existence, new ways of being in and knowing the places we occupy.

Marco's accounts of cities, then, do not merely sharpen our critical tools but our *perceptual* ones, allowing us to take notice of those aspects of the world that are not immediately obvious. There is value in the use of literature in this way, moving us beyond the sublimation of texts to hidden discourses and agendas, beyond precise codes that unlock their definitive meanings - beyond critique.

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## **Paper 2: Post-Critical Analysis of Student Wellbeing Discourses (Mariana Schwimmer)**

The post-structuralist tradition led by Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and others is often attacked for being overly critical, suspicious and leading to relativism and cynicism. However, I claim that these attacks rely on a misunderstanding: the task of unveiling power through deconstruction or genealogy was never the actual goal of these authors but only a mean for something else. Latour (2004) himself expressed that it was never his intention, when developing the discipline known as sociology of science, to put science itself into question. On the contrary, his intention was to get closer to its reality as a living *matter of concern*, as a living and socially relevant thing that concerns us, to reconnect it to the network of productive associations and interactions that gave it life in the first place and not as a set of determined and fixed categories of thought. The whole point of destabilizing meanings is not to exclude or undermine the possibility of meaning, it is to open and affirm new possibilities, it is about the “*determination of what matters*” (Astor, 2019, p. 87). In other words, post-criticality was always already a constitutive part of this type of critique.

From a critical perspective, discourse is never neutral and inevitably carries and installs power relations. Hence it should never be analysed without considering the influence of social and political contextual factors. This understanding has been largely influenced by Foucault's work according to whom discourse is a system of thought that makes certain things thinkable and sayable in a particular historical period, thus being the reflection of the social, cultural, and political tensions of the period. Often, when the social sciences undertake discourse analysis, they adopt such a critical perspective to denounce and resist various forms of oppression.

However, as mentioned, when the poststructuralist analyst uncovers the multiple layers embedded in a discourse, he or she does not only show its constructed nature, he or she also makes visible its accumulated possibilities of meaning, many often forgotten. This allows us to rework that discourse, to see how it might be transgressed and perhaps become more fruitful. Inspirations for this type of methodology might be found in the work of Bhabha (1994) who reworked the discourse about nationalism or the work of Césaire (1971) with the trend of “*négritude*”, a term coined to reclaim the pejorative meaning of blackness and assert the beauty of the cultural values of Africa. Following example of the wellbeing discourse shows what this would mean for education.

Since it was popularized in the 1960-70s through the field of humanist psychology, and was reframed around the 1990's, through positive psychology and neuroscience, the wellbeing discourse has spread widely. This is a discourse made of certain ideas of autonomy, authenticity, responsibility, self-reliance, self-regulation, resilience, or optimism that have been neutralized in some way and have come to represent a particular way of life. It could be said to be rather nihilistic because it represents a glorified image that no one would object to, a way of living that is somehow prescribed instead of encouraging richer and stronger accounts of what a life well lived could mean.

This discourse has given rise to critical work denouncing its socio-cultural pervasiveness. Critics have argued that it reflects a general tendency towards psychologization, depersonalization, and neoliberal normalization. Some deplore that young people in America are educated “in the vocabulary of emotion and the practice of self-absorption” (Rice, 2002). Many denounce that this psychologized educational experience also reflects a will to optimise students' psychological development (Kingfisher, 2013). Some have shown how this discourse may be even more detrimental to underprivileged groups (Jackson and Bingham, 2018). These lines of critiques are important in showing how dominant discourses such as psychology and management influence the way we conceive wellbeing and how we understand ourselves, work on ourselves and expect others to do so. However, by insisting primarily on issues of power imbalance, they fail to recognize the other possibilities they may contain that a “postcritical” analysis would value:

(1) A critique that fully integrates the post-critical dimension might look at what is there, what is manifest and enabled by the discourse, in its layers and peripheries. For example, Katie Wright (2014) analysed the wellbeing discourse in the Australian context going back to the 1960's and 70's to show how it was not only illustrative of a “therapeutic turn” but also of a growing democratic concern for social justice. Another example may be found in the work of Pierre Angers, a Quebec thinker almost forgotten today who was influenced by the Thomist Bernard Lonergan and his ideas about the appropriation of the mind and the formation of “insights” for the conversion to higher degrees of consciousness. These layers of meaning open different possibilities of thought.

(2) Also, a postcritical analysis would be attentive to what happens in the breach when dominant meanings about wellbeing have been destabilized, and when something needs to be enacted and affirmed. This is an ethical moment when we need to decide what matters and be responsible for what is to come. A way to look at this could be to look at different languages and traditions concerned with wellbeing, happiness, flourishing, traditions such as Buddhism (sati), the Greeks philosophical schools (the precept of care for the self : *epimeleia heautou*) or even more contemporary but marginal ones such as psychoanalysis, and experiment with them. Such an attitude would be educational in that it could constitute an initiation to a dimension of the world that can be seen as worth caring for and preserving. Such traditions of thought about “wellbeing” are not currently constituted as a subject matter in schools; however, it could be argued that they should because they would offer a richness of language for thinking and discussing about wellbeing, about what it is to live well, to care for the self and the world.

### **Paper 3: Building. A Possibility for a Post-Critical Perspective in Educational Research (Piotr Zamojski)**

In my contribution I intend to give account of research I conducted between 2009 and 2020 that aimed at building a public sphere around education in Poland. This investigation was a post-critical project by its design. In order to unpack its methodological underpinnings it is

necessary to explore the difference between three possibilities of researching the link between democratic public sphere and education.

First, one could choose to investigate the most effective way to initiate, organise and sustain public discourse on education, i.e. one could look for the objective rules governing that part of social reality, in order to establish reliable technical knowledge about how to facilitate the emergence of a durable public sphere around education. Such a positivistic kind of research would require identifying the key factors determining enacting a public sphere around education. This was not my intention. Second, one could aim at performing a critique of the existing public discourse on education debunking its hidden layers of power relations, and also its spectacular character (cf. Debord 2014). Such a critical inquiry would require using well established tools of social critique (e.g. ideology critique, critical discourse analysis, deconstruction, etc.) and would lead to bringing the hidden structures of oppression to the surface, and displaying the illusionary or simulated character of the debate (which usually amounts to what Habermas (1990) calls the refeudalisation of the public sphere). I have engaged in such an undertaking concerning the public discourse on education in one of my previous research and it was clear that providing yet another critique of this kind was possible, but would not lead to any unexpected results. What was, therefore, clear from the start was that I would like to make a different attempt, such that would aim at building a public sphere around education, i.e. aim at making a vibrant democratic public sphere concerning education happen here and now. In other words the key intention was not to seek efficiency, nor critique, but to focus on what becomes possible when a particular beginning is introduced to others within a particular conditions (i.e. on a particular terrain). The aim of the research was – in that sense – post-critical as it stemmed from the critical recognition of the status quo, but simultaneously tried to go beyond the given and explore the potentialities that did not reveal themselves in the critical knowledge about the state of affairs.

The basic methodological frame of this research was designed in relation to the perspective of Participatory Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; Kemmis et al 2014) with its insistence on the cyclical character of data collection and production (Lewin 1946). I have been following Hannah Arendt (1958) in her understanding of action as introduction of new beginnings that can be taken up by others as the most fundamental frame of understanding my actions (while being the researcher) and actions of my collaborators/participants. The beginning I intended to introduce was designed in relation to the idea of axiomatic action introduced by Jacques Ranciere (1991), who argues that action should not be confused with a process of production, and that its normative dimension lies not in the results it produces, but in the axioms it makes happen (i.e. assumptions that are performed while action takes place). He adds – moreover – that in education one can act in line with a normatively just axiom which, from the perspective of the critical knowledge – seems impossible. Just like 19th Century French pedagogue Joseph Jacotot acted upon the assumption that everyone has the same, equal intelligence. It was a fiction, but it worked – Ranciere (2003, p. 185) argues.

The axiom I introduced in the research aiming at building a public sphere around education referred to Aristotle's (1995) determination of the nature of slaves in terms of people whose reason is passive (i.e. they can recognize the rationale of a command, but they cannot think on their own). All my actions within this project based on the conviction that a democratic public sphere is possible only when people act according with the assumption that there is no Slave. Consistent and persistent acting on the basis of this assumption opens a possibility of a sphere of exception from the dominant social order (viz. Badiou 2005, Agamben 2005). In conclusion I will bring up some results of the inquiry that testify to this potentiality.

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#### **Paper 4: Post-Critical Pedagogy as a New Paradigm? (Stefano Oliverio & Bianca Thoilliez)**

In this paper, we want to tackle the question if post-critique is a new ‘paradigm’ or rather merely a new attitude within a horizon still fundamentally defined by critique? While it is moot whether the history of educational research has ever experienced paradigms in a strict sense, the notion of Kuhn is often used in a looser way to indicate a general view of the objects, purposes, methodological rules and norms that identify a disciplinary field and operate as “a regulative structure, an element of theoretical continuity” (Cambi, 1986, p. 25) in a domain of knowledge and practice. This implies that, differently from the Kuhnian paradigms *stricto sensu*, those in educational research do not need to replace each other but often (may) co-exist with each other. However, introducing the notion of paradigm may be helpful because it contributes to making it clear that these different traditions adopt different methodological rules and norms and originate from a different take on what education(al research) is all about.

It is precisely the ‘paradigm’ hypothesis that seems somewhat to preside over the understanding of the post-critical turn on the part of Zamojski (2022). He builds a fascinating narrative that distinguishes three main paradigms in the history of modern education: (i) the technical view, which draws upon the (ultimately scientific) rationality typical of modernity; (ii) the critical view that unveils the alienating and reifying character of the technical view and emphasizes how far the latter tends to be accomplice with and to reproduce the status quo; and (iii) the post-critical view that, while concurring with the concerns voiced by the critical stance, insinuates that the latter risks missing the specifically educational in education by hijacking educational research (and, indeed, educational practices) and veering off towards thought styles which bear a greater affinity with politics. If we accept an understanding of post-criticality as an alternative paradigm – and not merely as a change of attitude – we intimate that its objects,

purposes, and methods are significantly demarcated from those of the critical stance and that post-critical pedagogy does not confine itself to ‘a refined and very sensual revisitation’ (Guaraldo, 2020) of the critical tradition.

One more element may complicate the picture: Christiane Thompson (2021, p. 221) has gone as far as to state that ‘we understand critique as a basic educational concept. Critique is the mark of educational experience, or *Bildung*, in that it lays open the shortcomings of our world-disclosing practices’. It could be stated that the critical educational theory pivoting on the idea of *Bildung* is the heir of a specific tradition of the construction of the disciplinary field, which aims at raising educational (and not psychological, sociological, or philosophical etc.) questions about education by valorizing the idea of emancipation (Biesta, 2011). While post-critical pedagogy shares this appeal to the possibility of doing education(al research), it can be argued that it undertakes this endeavour in reference to a different principle: it proposes a shift from the logic of emancipation (with its strong political resonances) to an Arendtian grammar of responsibility and love of the world.

If we take seriously the idea that post-criticality is not merely an attitude still remaining within the orbit of the view that critique is the mark of educational experience but rather that it is a (new) paradigm, we can come to the conclusion that in the contemporary landscape of educational theory and philosophy critical educational theory (as ruled by a ‘philosophy of emancipation’) and post-criticality (as ruled by a ‘philosophy of responsibility and love of the world’) may represent two alternative options to structure the disciplinary field. To a certain extent, they may be the only available ‘paradigmatic’ possibilities. Indeed, as Zamojski points out, the logic of emancipation re-comprehends (possibly in all the meanings of the word) also the technical view of education.

Against this backdrop, a crucial question arises, viz. how to combine affirmative and critical vocabularies (Wortmann, 2019). While Wortmann arrives at the conclusion that ‘postcritical pedagogy is dialectically dependent – in a surprisingly Hegelian sense [...] – upon systematic criticism’ (p. 473), we suggest that a better combination may draw upon the quasi-Bohrian principle of complementarity: both views of the phenomenon-education are indispensable to provide a complete description of the phenomenon, but they cannot be deployed at the same time (and, thus, there is no dependence, let alone a one-way dependence). The love of the world advocated within post-critical pedagogy can be a creative force that encourages responsibility for its regeneration and recreation. The task of the post-critical educationalist would consist not so much in ignoring or turning a blind eye to the barriers that in fact unfairly restrict so many people as in affirming that other important things are also happening in educational situations which deserve our attention and in devising apposite methodological tools to take them into consideration as well.

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