

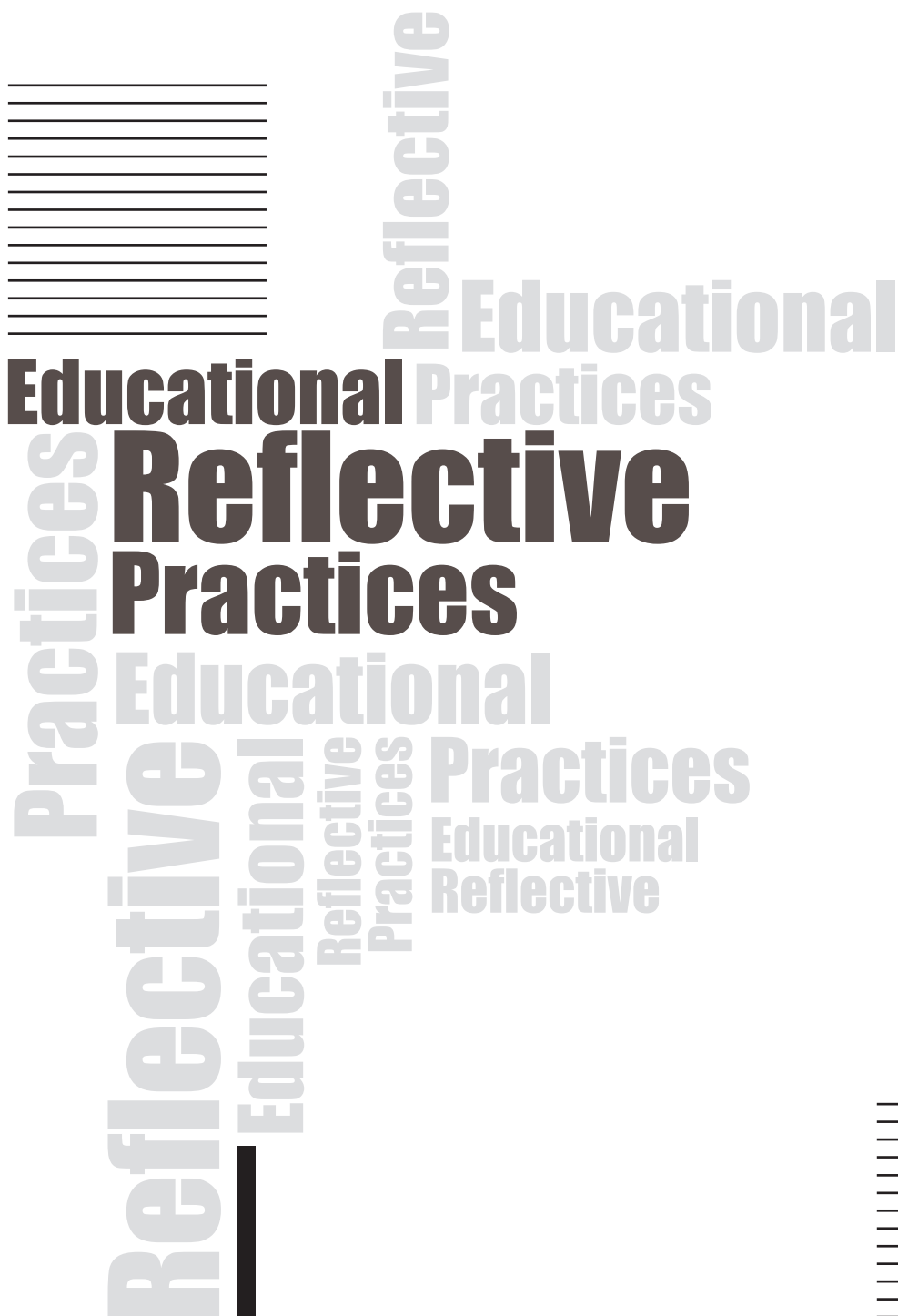
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Reflective Practices

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Introduction: Affirming social justice in education? Post-critical vistas

by *Stefano Oliverio, Joris Vlieghe, Piotr Zamojski and Claudio Melacarne*

This special issue of *Educational Reflective Practices* pursues two inter-related objectives, one broader and the other more specific.

The first is to introduce, for the first time in an Italian journal, the perspective of post-critical pedagogy (hereafter PCP), also by publishing the translation of its foundational text, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017).

The term *post-critical* designates a constellation of theoretical and methodological approaches that, despite their diverse origins, share certain reservations and concerns regarding the hegemony of the critical attitude in social sciences and the humanities. These approaches reflect on the need for a shift in orientation – if not an outright paradigm change (Oliverio & Thoilliez, 2024). Across a variety of disciplinary fields – ranging from sociology (e.g., Latour, Boltanski) to literary criticism (e.g., Felski), from philosophy (Serres) to political philosophy (Cooper) – there has been a growing interest in developing and employing new conceptual vocabularies. These seek to replace the hermeneutics of suspicion (which underpins the dominant critical paradigm) with an affirmative stance, aptly captured by Arendt’s formulation of a “love for the world.”

The *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* introduced the field of educational theory and philosophy into this interdisciplinary dialogue, sparking wide-ranging debates that, within only a few years, have culminated in numerous scholarly publications (the reader may be referred at least to the special issues appearing in *Teoría de la Educación* (32(2), 2020, pp. 7-106) and in *on_education. Journal for Research and Debate* (3(9), 2020), to the suite published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (58(6), 2024, pp. 929-1045) and to the symposium in *Ethics and Education* (14(4), 2019, pp. 449-504) as well as to Bittner & Wischmann [2022]).

PCP represents an attempt to respond to what the authors identify as an impasse within critical pedagogy, which – for the reasons also discussed in the articles that follow – at times appears to have exhausted the transforma-

tive and emancipatory impetus that had characterized its rise in the twentieth century.

Studies, research, and reflections that have made *critique* the principal operative category of pedagogical debate – such as those inspired by Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu, or Michel Foucault – have emphasized the role of education as a vehicle for social transformation and a means of struggle against oppression. They have stressed the necessity of deconstructing in order to reconstruct, of proceeding through movements of unveiling and excavation, guided by a perspective attentive to the intrinsic limits of a world that must be “liberated.”

Without denying the achievements of critical pedagogy, post-critical pedagogy operates on a different terrain, advancing an *autotelic* approach to education (captured in the motto *education for education's sake*). This is not to be understood as a sign of disengagement or as a dandy-like posture, but rather as a commitment to recovering the value of “the pedagogical” *iuxta propria principia*, without subordinating it to external logics – however welcome from other standpoints – such as those that assign to education an essentially political role of correcting the distortions of the world.

It is to be hoped that this perspective will prove of interest in the Italian context and that it will encounter interlocutors capable of engaging with it from within the country's pedagogical tradition. Four possible trajectories may be cursorily indicated. First, PCP could contribute to rethinking polarizations between traditional and progressive approaches, between content-centered and competence-centered didactics, and between Catholic and ‘laic’ orientations. Secondly, the *Manifesto* addresses what might be described as relativistic drifts, and it reintroduces, in a new light, the concept of educational authority. Within the school context in particular, the authority of the teacher is often either called into question or, conversely, asserted in nostalgic and clearly backward-looking forms. Post-critique, drawing creatively on motifs from Arendt, Rancière, and Latour, conceptualizes, instead, pedagogical authority as grounded in love for the world and in the “thing” under study – around which students, that is those who study, including teachers, are gathered (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019) – rather than in the explanatory power of authority or in a reverence for simple technical expertise. Thirdly, PCP helps to illuminate how the functionalization of education (e.g., education for entrepreneurship, digital citizenship, sustainability, etc.), far from expanding the pedagogical domain, subjects it to external agendas, thereby obfuscating the intrinsic value of culture and of the passion for the “thing” to be studied. Finally, PCP recuperates the meaning of utopia (Oliverio & Zamojski, 2025), not as a deferred horizon, but as a

commitment to be enacted in the here and now – hope realized in the present (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 18).

This introduction to PCP takes place – and this constitutes the specific objective of the volume – through a particular lens, one that is in some respects new within the literature on this perspective. Indeed, this special issue presents revised and expanded versions of the contributions originally delivered in a panel held within the framework of the Third International *Scuola democratica* Conference, devoted to “Education and/or Social Justice.”

That panel represented a challenge in two respects. On the one hand, for the reasons already mentioned – linked to the assertion of the autotelic character of education, to the sharp distinction between the educational and the political spheres (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020), and to the warning against the risk of subordinating education to political agendas – the post-critical orientation might appear, at first sight, to be inhospitable to an original engagement with the issue of social justice. And yet, what post-critical pedagogy calls for is not the removal of the political dimension of education, but rather a different way of addressing it, through a reformulation of the relationship between politics and education. Within this horizon, the central aim of the panel then (and of this special issue now) has been to investigate how the relationship between education and social justice is to be understood from a post-critical perspective, and to delineate its specificities in comparison with the ways in which it is usually thematized within the critical tradition. More specifically, the intent has been to explore what shape a *genuinely educational* conception of social justice might assume – one capable of having repercussions also at the level of policy – rather than merely “importing” into the educational field the notion of social justice itself, with the attendant risk of instrumentalizing education (that is, reducing it to a mere vehicle for the pursuit of external ends, however valuable).

The second challenge was to initiate a dialogue between PCP – emerging, as aforementioned, from the field of educational theory and philosophy – and other areas of education studies, in particular the sociology of education, where similar questions have been raised, though with solutions not entirely overlapping (cf. the notion of “affirmative critique” in the article by Catanese et al. in this special issue).

As the reader will see, this special issue – and more broadly, the space for discussion and reflection opened by the *Manifesto* – does not seek to impose the post-critical perspective as a sole or exclusive horizon of reference. On the contrary, it welcomes contributions that problematize some of its assumptions, by offering alternative readings of authors – such as Hannah Arendt – who belong to the PCP canon (see Męczkowska-

Christiansen's contribution). Alongside contributions that focus more directly on the political dimension and on justice in a broad sense (cf. Vlieghe & Zamojski, Nardo, Rojan, Pessers & Vlieghe, Oliverio & Santarelli, Melacarne), this issue also features articles that address social justice from less conventional perspectives, including concrete educational practices (Nardo, Bonafede & Rovea, Catanese et al.) and reflections on the distinctions between critical and post-critical approaches (Oliverio & Santarelli, Melacarne, Catanese et al.).

We do not endeavour to prescribe a particular trajectory. Readers may chart their own paths through the papers and the *Manifesto*. Our hope is simply that they will engage in the ongoing conversation and help to enrich the vocabularies through which education is conceived and practiced.

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Manifesto per una pedagogia post-critica*

by Naomi Hodgson[^], Joris Vlieghe[°], Piotr Zamojski[§]

La formulazione di principi, almeno in filosofia dell'educazione, sembra rimandare a una forma di analisi normativa e concettuale associata allo stile della filosofia analitica di area anglofona.

Tuttavia la filosofia post-strutturalista e postmodernista – almeno per come sono state accolte nella teoria dell'educazione e, più in generale, nel pensiero comune – spesso comporta un relativismo che rende difficile la difesa di principi, pur essendo potenzialmente inclusivo e certamente essenziale, oggi, per le possibilità di scelta individuale. Nel momento in cui affermiamo principi, nella forma di un manifesto, rischiamo di essere accusati di normatività universalizzante ed escludente. Ma forse è giunto il tempo di mettere in discussione il presupposto che i principi siano intrinsecamente e sempre negativi.

Di seguito esponiamo alcuni principi fondati sulla convinzione nelle possibilità di trasformazione, quale si trova nella teoria e nella pedagogia critica, ma animandola con un atteggiamento affermativo: proponiamo un orientamento post-critico all'educazione che faccia leva sulle nostre condizioni attuali e che si fondi su una speranza per ciò che deve ancora venire.

Il **primo principio** che si intende qui affermare è semplicemente che **ci sono dei principi da difendere**. Ma questo di per sé non ci impegna a nient'altro, ossia a dover fare uno specifico x. Questa non è normatività nel senso di definire uno stato ideale attuale o futuro rispetto al quale la pratica attuale dovrebbe essere giudicata. Pertanto, questo principio potrebbe essere caratterizzato come la difesa di un passaggio dalla **normatività procedurale alla normatività di principio**.

* Traduzione italiana a cura di Stefano Oliverio e Claudio Melacarne.

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Nella teoria pedagogica, il pensiero post-strutturalista e postmodernista è stato spesso assunto in termini di politica dell'identità, e quindi di interesse per l'alterità, la diversità e il riconoscimento della pluralità delle voci. Il rispetto per l'altro e per la differenza richiede che gli educatori accettino che non potranno mai conoscere pienamente l'altro. Qualsiasi tentativo in tal senso costituisce, per così dire, "violenza" contro l'altro. Così viene preclusa la possibilità di agire e di parlare; ciò costituisce un problema politico oltre che educativo, forse riassunto nella frase spesso sentita (anche se solo come sussurro) "So che non ti è più permesso dirlo, ma...", e nella deplorazione della cosiddetta correttezza politica. L'accettazione del fatto che non potremo mai comprendere appieno l'altro – individuo o cultura – non dovrebbe implicare che non possiamo parlare. Questa interpretazione del "rispetto" trascura il fatto che la comprensione e il rispetto sono sfide e speranze perpetue. Qui partiamo dal presupposto che – insieme – possiamo parlare e agire e quindi passiamo dalla pedagogia ermeneutica, che la pedagogia critica implica, alla difesa di una **ermeneutica pedagogica – che è un secondo principio**. Sono proprio le sfide della convivenza in un mondo comune a costituire la speranza che l'educazione continui ad apparire come un'attività che abbia valore. L'ermeneutica non è un problema (irrisolvibile), ma piuttosto qualcosa che gli educatori devono creare. Non dovremmo parlare e agire sulla base di presupposti *a priori* circa la (im)possibilità di una reale comprensione e rispetto reciproci, ma piuttosto mostrare che, nonostante le molte differenze che ci dividono, esiste uno spazio di comunanza che accade solo *a posteriori* (cfr. Arendt, Badiou, Cavell).

Questo spazio esistente di comunanza viene spesso trascurato in molte ricerche, politiche e pratiche educative a favore di un *focus* sull'(in)giustizia sociale e sull'esclusione, sulla base del presupposto della disuguaglianza. L'*ethos* della pedagogia critica perdura, oggi, nell'impegno a raggiungere l'uguaglianza, non attraverso l'emancipazione ma piuttosto attraverso l'*empowerment* degli individui e delle comunità. Tuttavia, è reso senza speranza – per non dire cinico – dall'apparente inevitabilità della razionalità neoliberista. Ma non c'è alcuna *necessità* nell'ordine delle cose dato e quindi, per quanto insormontabile sembri l'ordine attuale, c'è speranza. Il **terzo principio**, quindi, fondato sul presupposto dell'uguaglianza (cfr. Rancière) e della possibilità di trasformazione – a livello individuale e collettivo – comporta il passaggio **dalla pedagogia critica alla pedagogia post-critica**.

Questa non è affatto una posizione anti-critica. È grazie all'enorme apparato critico, estremamente potente, sviluppato nel corso del XX secolo che siamo consapevoli delle caratteristiche principali dello *status quo* in cui siamo immersi. Ma, a differenza della critica intrinseca delle istituzioni so-

ciali, focalizzata sulla loro disfunzionalità, o della critica utopica, condotta da una posizione trascendente e risultante nell'eterno differimento del cambiamento desiderato, crediamo che sia tempo di concentrare i nostri sforzi sul tentativo di rivendicare le parti sopresse della nostra esperienza; vediamo il compito di una pedagogia post-critica non come quello di smascherare ma di proteggere e curare (cfr. Latour, Haraway). Questa cura e protezione assumono la forma del chiedersi nuovamente che cosa siano l'educazione, la cura dei bambini, la scuola, lo studio, il pensiero e la pratica. Questa rivendicazione non comporta più una relazione critica – che rivelerebbe ciò che sta realmente accadendo – né una relazione strumentale – che mostra che cosa dovrebbero fare gli educatori – ma la creazione di uno spazio di pensiero che consenta alla pratica di accadere, nuovamente. Ciò significa (ri)stabilire il nostro rapporto con le nostre parole, aprendole alla domanda e prestando attenzione filosofica a questi aspetti svalutati delle nostre forme di vita e quindi – in linea con una normatività di principio – difendere questi eventi come autotelici, non funzionalizzati, ma semplicemente degni di cura.

L'educazione è, in un senso molto pratico, basata sulla speranza. Nella pedagogia critica “tradizionale”, tuttavia, questa speranza di emancipazione poggia, in tre modi particolari, proprio sul regime di disuguaglianza che cerca di superare:

1. mette in atto una sorta di pedagogia ermeneutica: l'educatore presuppone che l'altro non abbia i mezzi per comprendere che è incatenato al proprio modo di vedere il mondo. L'educatore [*pedagogue*]¹ si posiziona come esterno a tale condizione, ma deve criticare il presente e liberare i non illuminati (cfr. la caverna di Platone);
2. in realtà ciò finisce per riaffermare la sua posizione superiore, e quindi per reinstallare un regime di disuguaglianza. Non esiste una vera rottura con lo *status quo*;
3. inoltre, il punto di vista esterno da cui parla l'educatore [*pedagogue*] critico è totalmente incatenato allo *status quo*, ma in modo meramente negativo: il critico è spinto dalla passione dell'odio. In tal modo, lei o lui si attengono surrettiziamente a ciò che è e che sempre sarà. Gli approcci giudicanti e dialettici testimoniano questo atteggiamento negativo.

L'educatore [*pedagogue*] assume così il ruolo di chi è chiamato a sollevare il velo; ciò da cui si solleva il velo, tuttavia, è lo *status quo* su cui ci si erge nel giudizio esterno. Per formulare in modo più positivo il ruolo del

¹ Si è tradotto il *pedagogue* dell'originale con “educatore” ma l'argomentazione si riferisce anche alla figura del “pedagogista” [*nota dei traduttori*].

l'educatore [*pedagogue*], come colei/lui che inizia a un mondo comune la nuova generazione, offriamo l'idea di una pedagogia post-critica, che esige un amore per il mondo. Non si tratta di accettare come stanno le cose, bensì di affermare il valore di ciò che facciamo nel presente e quindi delle cose che riteniamo meritevoli di essere trasmesse. Ma non così come sono: la speranza educativa riguarda la possibilità di un rinnovamento del nostro mondo comune. Quando amiamo veramente il mondo, il nostro mondo, dobbiamo voler trasmetterlo alla nuova generazione, partendo dal presupposto che essi, i nuovi arrivati, possano accoglierlo alle loro condizioni. Pertanto, il **quarto principio** implica il passaggio **dall'ottimismo crudele** (cfr. Berlant) **alla speranza nel presente**. Il cinismo e il pessimismo non sono, in un certo senso, un riconoscimento di come stanno le cose, bensì il loro evitamento (cfr. Cavell, Emerson).

Nelle formulazioni attuali, prendersi cura del mondo è inquadrato nei termini di educazione *alla* cittadinanza, educazione *alla* giustizia sociale, educazione *alla* sostenibilità ecc., ossia in vista di una particolare nozione di cittadinanza globale e di una forma imprenditoriale di dialogo interculturale. Anche se forse sostenuta da una pedagogia progressista e critica, la preoccupazione, in tali formulazioni di responsabilità per il mondo, riguarda fini esterni all'educazione. Per quanto tradizionale o conservatore possa sembrare, desideriamo difendere l'educazione per l'educazione [*education for education's sake*]²: educazione come studio o iniziazione a una materia per il suo valore intrinseco, educativo, piuttosto che per il suo valore strumentale, affinché essa possa essere ripresa dalle nuove generazioni. Attualmente, il mondo (futuro) è già appropriato attraverso l'"educazione a..." e diventa strumentale per altri (nostri) fini. Così, il **quinto principio** ci porta **dall'educazione alla cittadinanza all'amore per il mondo**. È tempo di riconoscere e affermare che c'è del buono nel mondo che vale la pena preservare. È giunto il momento in cui allo smascheramento del mondo segua un riconoscimento del mondo, pieno di speranza. È tempo di mettere ciò che c'è di buono nel mondo – ciò che è minacciato e che desideriamo preservare – al centro della nostra attenzione e di creare uno spazio concettuale in cui possiamo assumerci la nostra responsabilità per esso, di fronte a e malgrado l'oppressione e la silenziosa melanconia.

² La dizione rimanda all'idea dell'educazione come fine in sé, ossia a ciò che in altro punto del testo i definisce il carattere autotelico dell'educazione. Anche d'accordo con gli autori, si è deciso tradurre come "l'educazione per l'educazione" – quasi in analogia con l'espressione "l'arte per l'arte" – perché la ripetizione del termine "educazione" veicola in maniera efficace tale autotelismo [*nota dei traduttori*].

Post-critical Pedagogy and Social Justice. Thing Avoidance or Trust in the World

by Joris Vlieghe*, Piotr Zamojski°

Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between education, democracy, and social justice, challenging the dominant view that education should serve as an instrument for achieving political goals, including equity and inclusion. Drawing on post-critical educational theories, particularly the works of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière, the authors argue that education is an autonomous, intergenerational practice centered on introducing newcomers to the common world, fostering love and care for it, and enabling its renewal. The instrumentalization of education for social justice, they contend, undermines its essence by prioritizing critique over affirmation and imposing anti-educational practices like censorship and stultification. Similarly, the article criticizes the conflation of democracy with social justice, emphasizing that democracy is rooted in radical equality and collective deliberation around shared concerns, rather than the rectification of historical injustices. Ultimately, the authors advocate for a “thing-centered” approach to education and democracy, grounded in trust in the world and its shared durability.

Keywords: Education; Democracy; Social Justice; Post-critical pedagogy; Trust in the World.

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Introduction

In this article we aim to make a contribution to the question how we should conceive of the relationship between education, democracy and social justice. We do this against a double background. First, we want to position ourselves within a timely debate in which a particular way of looking at this issue has become dominant, if not self-evident. Currently, it is as if it goes without saying that the sphere of education is the pivotal actor in explaining why our current societies don't live up to the expectations of excelling in democratic ethos and in providing inclusion and equal opportunities to all. At the same time it is also often automatically assumed that it is education which holds the key to solve these thorny and urgent societal challenges (cf. Zajda et al., 2006; Applebaum, 2010; OECD 2023). In this article we want to defend the uncommon claim that the relations between education, democratic politics and social justice are more complex than this imaginary assumes, i.e. that education – although intrinsically connected with the democratic way of life – cannot be conceived of in terms of an instrument to achieve political ends, including the aim of social justice. This is to say, we run the risk of throwing overboard the most valuable dimensions of education when we turn it into a vehicle for named political aims. Of course, the point of view we defend is rooted in a particular understanding of what education is, and what it is not. This leads us to a second background to our argument that we want to set out right from the beginning of this article: we will adhere here to a post-critical understanding of education (Hodgson et al., 2017) that regards it as an autotelic human practice which takes place at the meeting point between the older generation, newcomers to the world, and the world itself. Education, then, is an intergenerational endeavour of making young people attentive to the world, so that they start caring for it in their own, ever new manner. What is at stake in education is, thus, in essence the introduction of the newcomers into the common world we all share, so as to warrant its continuation as well as it being renewed by the new generation (Arendt, 1961).

We will start our reflections with a most actual and crucial illustration, to which we will come back throughout our reasoning in this text. It regards a clear case of how in an educational context, out of the best political motives, the possibility of jointly studying the world, and hence of sharing one and the same world, is made impossible. More exactly, we want to discuss an illustration of a form of censorship that, in our view, very tellingly shows why education (but also democracy itself) cannot be regarded as essentially aimed at achieving social justice. This case also shows that a consequential application of such a political logic in the realm of education simply entails

the disappearance of education. After introducing and discussing this example, we then separately unpack our claims and go deeper, first, into the issue of social justice and, then, into the question of education and democracy, showing that at an ontological level both democracy and education assume a thing-centred orientation (*Umgang*), whereas social justice at an existential plane results in thing-avoidance.

Emptying out the museum as a questionable ontological operation

To start our argument, we refer to an event one of the authors witnessed when recently paying a visit to the Chicago History Museum. In the first section which details the period prior to the occupation of Illinois by the European conquerors, a showcase was to be found where clearly an object that had been there before was removed. Most probably, because it no longer stands the test of postcolonial sensitivities. To replace it a public notice was put in the empty showcase, signalling:

As part of the ongoing redesign of this exhibition and ongoing collections research, we have discovered that some objects were not appropriate for display and [these] have been removed from view from further research and consultation with indigenous communities.

One might wonder why the museum curator has decided to put this message rather than just to take away whatever object was there to be seen in the showcase. One could speculate whether this is above all a case of virtue signalling and political correctness. The real meaning of what happened here is then that those responsible for the museum collection want to show to what extent they are in line with the current political order and that they seem to be proud of it. However, our point here is not to delve into the deeper intentions of the museum management. What we do want to point out is that what happened here is far from innocent and that it comes with profound ontological implications, i.e. with consequences for what we can and cannot experience as real and for what it means to have a world in common.

We take our cue here from the work of Jacques Rancière (2004), who would define such an operation as a particular *distribution* or, more to the point here, a *redistribution of the sensible*. For Rancière, in any existing society, there exists a *police order* which guarantees societal cohesion and prosperity by installing a particular regime of what people can say and what not, what they can see and hear and what not, etc. As such, societal order goes hand in hand with a definition of what counts as real and what is simply

inexistent. For instance, that what certain groups of excluded people have to say is – literally – sensed as noise – not real speech and hence to be disregarded (Rancière, 1999, p.22). Societal order is always dependent upon a basic division between what is perceivable and what is not. Social transformation, therefore, is always predicated upon shifts in this regime of the sensible, e.g. oppressed groups of people succeeding in having their voice heard. To a certain and not unimportant extent social change is only possible thanks to a reordering of the aesthetical realm. Moreover, what Rancière implies is that we have to understand the (re)distribution of the sensible in ontological terms (see Vlieghe and Zamojski, in press): this operation is all about the decision on what counts as real, and what not, and hence what belongs and what does not belong to the world.

In the context of museum education, Rancière's powerful framework is mostly used to reflect the emancipatory potential of amending existing collections and exhibitions according to new political sensitivities (e.g. Toria-Kelly, 2017). It is then argued that traditional museum settings have been for centuries a source of fierce exclusion and oppression *because* they are particular temporal, spatial and architectural constellations that govern the experience of reality of those who visit them. It is argued, for instance, that the items on display testify to an exclusionist euro- and phallocentric worldview or stories are told in such a way that only the views of the conquerors is present. Crucially, the visitors can't be blamed for their ignorance or for the way in which their visit contributes to existing oppression, precisely *because* the dominant distribution of the sensible is – understandably – taken for granted. Hence, we can only realize more social justice, inclusion and equity by redistributing the sensible in a more inclusive manner, so that new reality can see the light of day: as from then the excluded become part of our world too.

However, in the example we gave at the beginning of this text, Rancière's (2004) framework points in an altogether different direction. What is at stake here is not so much a widening of reality as a closing down. Seen from this perspective, the logical consequence of the operation of censorship in question would be that a museum that is completely endorsing social justice requirements is actually a museum where all the items on display have been removed – a completely empty museum. After all, it is easily imaginable that for every item in a museum someone can feel hurt, vexed or unsettled for good reasons and therefore that it needs to be regarded as “not appropriate for display”, to use the words of the curator of the Chicago History Museum. Or even stronger: is there any innocent exhibit? Can one point to, or even imagine an artifact displayed in a museum that would not be in any way connected to the history of oppression, marginalisation, enslavement, war,

genocide, pollution of the natural environment, climate crisis, etc.? In that sense choosing to remove one item but leaving all the others is placing one form of suffering above the others – and hence not really a neutral operation. Censorship is not only not innocent, but also, when understood as an ontological operation of (re)distributing the sensible, comes essentially down to defining what our common world is. The risk here is that we end up with a very poor world (or no common world whatsoever), and one that is not desirable for both educational *and* political reasons. In what follows we want to substantiate why we believe this to be the case. In the next section we zoom in on the implications this ontological operation has for the sphere of education. It is evident that the removal of objects from display comes with the impossibility to study them together. The fundamental educational gesture of showing newcomers particular aspects of the world we share, so that they can make up their mind about it, and hence, can go on with it in their way, is seriously imperilled, if not threatened per se. When it is decided that certain things cannot be studied, this is an outright anti-educational gesture. And when precise limits are set to what counts as being part of our world, the possible directions in which our world could be renewed are heavily curtailed.

After this, we look at the political implications, and more exactly the jeopardizing effects this ontological operation has on democracy itself. Although, as will become clear, in our view education and politics should be neatly separated as profoundly different spheres of life, they have nevertheless in common that they both get seriously threatened when a social justice agenda starts to be imposed on them. By saying this we want to problematize the today very popular idea that both education and politics should be understood in terms of promoting – or not – more equity and inclusion.

Education for or about social justice?

There are two reasons why we hold to the, at first sight probably outlandish claim, that education and the desire for social justice should not be confused. One reason is provided by Hannah Arendt's (1961) conception of education in her seminal essay on the *Crisis in Education*, the other by Rancière's (1991) own account of education in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Both authors form the backbone of post-critical educational theories, since each developed a conceptual apparatus allowing for understanding education from within, i.e. as an autonomous sphere of human life, and not a set of psycho-social processes functional to politics. Hence, both Arendt and

Rancière offer us a powerful vocabulary for understanding why there are excellent educational reasons for not letting enter social justice agendas in the realms of educating the new generation.

Arendt is not in the first place an educational scholar, but a political theorist. Nevertheless, her interest in education is driven by her intuition that the spheres of education and the one of politics are two separate domains of living together, each predicated on a different logic of how to relate to ourselves, others and the world – which we will call here, using a Heideggerian (1962) phraseology, *Umgang*. Democratic *Umgang*, then, is the way in which adults gather to deal with issues that defy our life in common – aspects of the world that need to be ameliorated or rectified. Exclusion and inequity are examples that come to mind. This kind of (political) *Umgang* is an answer to what is wrong in the world, so as to set straight what we find undesirable as a collective. Therefore we need to come together (e.g. in parliament) around the part of the world that is put into question, so as to be able to have our say and to be informed and changed by what others have to say. The logic at work here is one of radical equality (everyone has a say and no voice is privileged over any other – everyone counts as one). The modus operandi of this logic is that we do more than just sharing opinions, rather: in democratic politics people literally gather around some-*thing*, so that they are constantly aware that what is at stake is not just individual opinions, desires, and private interests, but a world – and things within it – we share. Democratic *Umgang*, in this view, is always a question of ‘commonizing’ (Vlieghe and Zamojski 2022). The aim behind this particular form of *Umgang* is to change the world for the better.

If we think about it in these terms, it becomes clear why, for instance, the sphere of democratic politics is fundamentally different from the economical sphere, and moreover, why both spheres should be clearly shut off from one another (as economy makes private interests enter the scene which are antithetical to the political logic). The same, Arendt argues, applies to the spheres of politics and education: they are predicated on mutually exclusive logics and the borders between them should be defended in order to let politics be politics and education be education. This notwithstanding, there are important similarities between forms of *Umgang* at work in both spheres, i.e. practices and gestures they share. For instance, both are based on the firm believe that there is one world we share with each other and that there is no necessity in how things are. Therefore both involve gathering people around a shared thing (see Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2022). We will come back to this point in the next section. However, here we need to stress that there exists a typically *educational* way of commonizing that is markedly different from a political one. This is because in the educational sphere we deal with relations

not between equal political actors, but between the generations, who are by definition not equal. Not unequal in a political sense, but in the meaning that one generation has already been living in a world, has contributed to its continuation (or has refused to do so) and hence has a responsibility vis-à-vis it, whereas the other generation first arrives in this world as complete newcomers.

It is therefore the particularly *educational* responsibility of the old generation to welcome these newcomers (rather than leave them to their own devices), to organize infrastructural and temporal conditions where they can develop attention for, and interest in this world (arrangements we call schools), and most importantly, to try and show what we deem to be worthwhile in it (music, history, woodcraft, cooking, spelling and grammar, etc.) and why we believe this to be the case. Education is essentially a matter of showing and sharing love for the world. It is thus a matter of affirmation rather than critique (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019). Opposed to the logic constitutive of political *Umgang*, the starting point is not that there is something wrong with the world, but rather that there is something good and worth preserving. Without undertaking the effort of introducing newcomers to our world and of showing what is so interesting and fascinating about music, history, woodcraft, etc. the world would simply wither away. However, education is not only about the world's continuity, but also about its potential rejuvenation. Newcomers get to know the world not because of the attempt to freeze it in the way it currently is – which is as lethal as its sounds. Rather, knowing the world always poses a question: what would you do with it now? How would you continue? How will you go on with the world, care for it – always implying that every continuation is possible only through new beginnings? The world can only be renewed, and it is up to the new generation to invent their unique ways to begin anew with the world. The paradoxical challenge of educational *Umgang* is thus that we pass on an existing world, but in such a way that the next generation can start anew with it, maybe in directions that we cannot foresee and don't like.

For this to be possible, newcomers must be allowed to study the things we offer them for their own sake: mathematics just for the sake of what mathematics demands of us, cooking techniques because they are engrossing, history because understanding the past is enchanting and thus worthwhile in and of itself. When education is made subservient to a political goal, no matter how commendable that goal would be, its essence gets destroyed. It is then no longer about studying the world together, but about installing particular qualities in children. In this case, what is at stake is not the common world and the possibility of a new future, but the realization of a dreamed better future in which for instance our children, when grown up,

behave according to set ideals of civility or save the planet from impending ecological disaster. This might, for instance, involve that we give up the study of long begone eras as no longer relevant in our day and age, or turning mathematics into an applied science for securing solutions to global warming. Typically, so Arendt (1962) would add, this instrumentalization of education regards political goals that the elder generation was not able to realize themselves, and in that sense the politicization of education testifies to political irresponsibility: issues which we couldn't resolve ourselves are passed on as tasks for the newcomers to fulfil, meanwhile robbing them of their own force of newness and their right to decide about the future (both their own future, and the future of the common world).

In that sense education and politics for social justice don't go together at all. Or at least not in the sense we usually think. When education is used as an instrument for realizing more equity and inclusion, we start from what is wrong with the world instead of first giving newcomers a chance to develop interest in and attention for the world and to start loving and caring this world. Critique takes over affirmation. We then simply force an ideal of a better world upon them in the hope that they will solve our unresolved political and societal issues. The possibility to study and renew the world is then completely closed off.

All this, however, is not to say that there is no possible relation between education and politics. The whole point is that one can also think of this relation from the point of view of educational logic itself. More exactly, we want to argue that the fact that education should not be a means for achieving social justice does not at all preclude the possibility that democracy and social justice could become themselves interesting things of study (keeping in mind that as studiers we can develop fascination and even love for politically undesirable phenomena, in the same way that we can love to study wars and coronaviruses while understanding that a world without these phenomena is, obviously, preferable). This is what sets apart *political education*, or rather: *politicized education*, from *education about politics*. That there exist various ways of organizing political *Umgang* (democracy being one of these) and how they work (by means of inclusion and exclusion for instance) can become the object of a joint inquiry of the older and the new generation when they meet around particular subject matters. It is then to students as newcomers to make up *their* mind about these after carefully studying them first. To return to the example of the emptied museum, we see the opposite happening here: instead of offering students visiting the museum the opportunity to actually investigate whatever was put in the showcase, someone closes them off from the world and refuses them the

opportunity to form their ideas about it, arguably out of the best, but highly anti-educational intentions.

Having said this, we want to move over to the second reason why we problematize the all too simple functionalist understanding of education as a bringer of equity and inclusion. Here we refer to Rancière's (1991) insight that equality can never be a goal to be achieved through education, but at most a starting point. With this he means that equality relates to a basic attitude teachers start from when dealing with the new generation. More than often are we inclined to assume that educators need to explain things for students who are not able to think for themselves and to study the world. Hence, we regard it as our pedagogical task to think in their place, i.e. to liberate them from their ignorance and bondage by systematically leading them towards the same level of intelligence we already have achieved. This attitude leads to, as Rancière shows, positioning equality as something we infinitely approximate but never achieve, and by doing this we reinstall *hic et nunc* inequality as it is always the one who is already emancipated who has to decide whether or not the gap between ignorance and enlightenment has been bridged. Over and against this, a truly educational form of *Umgang* with our students is to fully assume that there is only one intelligence, one capacity for making sense of the world, to investigate it and to express our ideas about it, and that we all share this capacity. This, of course, is not to say that everyone also spontaneously makes use of this capacity, as we might very easily not be attentive or interested in the thing of study. It is precisely for this reason that teachers are needed. It is their task to try and put students' intelligence at work, for instance by sharing their own love for things in the world. By showing why history matters or why woodcraft is so compelling – in the belief that others can begin finding these phenomena equally important. Only the teacher who acts under this belief is truly emancipating, whereas the one starting from the assumption of inequality (even out of the best of intentions and with a deserving pedagogical ideal in mind) is in fact stultifying.

The last thing clearly happens in the case we started from: the visitors to the museum are not allowed to study all of the history of Chicago because someone else has decided for them that it is not 'appropriate' to do so. In the name of social justice they are protected from the harm that might come to them. The assumption behind this operation is a deep (paternalistic) split: between, on the one hand those who have superior insight and who understand what is harmful and what not and, on the other hand, those who are not ready to deal with the study material and who must be saved by other and more intelligent people than they themselves. In that sense a logic of stultification is at work, which makes study for the sake of study, and hence

a genuinely educational relation to the world impossible. Again, what might happen in the future is narrowed down and strictly controlled by a set police order in the name of social justice.

On a more general level, we want to stress, once more, that there is a significant difference between *social justice education* on the one hand and *education about social justice* on the other hand. The first implies that we conceive of education as an instrument for fostering (more) social justice. What we have argued for with Rancière is that in this case instrumentalization inevitably comes with the antipedagogical division between those with superior reasoning power and those who (momentarily) lack it. It is only when we make social justice itself into an object of study that we can work on the basis of an assumption of equality of intelligences. Only then we educate on the basis of the assumption that all are able to investigate the matter and to form and to express coherently their own ideas about said matter. To be clear, social (in)justice is an important part of our shared world, and more exactly a phenomenon that could be interesting, if not fascinating, and that deserves to be the object of study. Contrary to this, as we argued, removing the item from the exhibition for the sake of social justice (i.e. so as not to offend someone and not to reproduce evil and suffering) is an antieducational gesture of stultification.

Thing avoidance or social justice against democracy (and education)

So far we argued that acting in the name of social justice is completely different from the logic constitutive of the sphere of education. Educational *Umgang*, i.e. the way we go about with the world and ourselves in the sphere of education, is threatened when social justice is imposed on it. This does not mean that education and social justice are absolutely isolated phenomena: in the political sphere, for instance, the (universal) right to have access to education is a matter of social justice and, as we have just shown, within the sphere of education social justice matters can become the subject of study. What we want to problematize, however, is the growing tendency of the political sphere to impose social justice aims on education, introducing antieducational practices of censorship and stultification.

In what follows we want to argue that the matter is actually even more complex and much more worrisome, because we will show that, opposed to what many would spontaneously believe, also democracy as such is a specific political arrangement that in essence is radically different from the ideal of striving for social justice.

Let us start by saying that there is no democracy without the axiom of equality, and that democratic deliberation can, and often does concern matters of social justice. However, we argue, democracy refers to a completely different constellation of ideas and ideals than social justice. As it will become clear, democracy was never about justice in terms of setting all the wrongs of the world straight again, but originated from the minimal and risky idea of justice derived from the logic of chance (cf. Rancière, 2001).

To start with, it should be acknowledged with Badiou (2005) that democracy is based on a particular idea of arithmetic equality, where everyone is *counted as one*, regardless of their identities, biography, status, race, gender, etc. Democracy fundamentally cuts off or suspends the existing power relations, oppression, marginalisation, status games, etc., as well as the past events that have led to the current status quo. All this does not matter when it comes to a vote: regardless of who you are, the ordeals you went through, what kind of sorrows, injustices, oppression and enslavement you experienced, or what immense power and richness you gathered – every vote counts exactly as one. This arithmetic principle regards a very modest, but at the same time most radical form of equality. There is nothing in democracy itself that holds the promise that there will be no more oppression or marginalisation, or that one day power relations and socio-economic inequalities would disappear. Instead, democracy is a very minimal and formal arrangement that nevertheless comes with a radical cut, which consists of systematically or institutionally (and legally) making distinctions in societal positions inoperative.

That democracy is fundamentally about suspending social identity markers is also clear when we consider its very historical origins, i.e. when we look at the way the ancient Athenian polis was organised. It is usually overlooked that Athenians did not know representative democracy and that they did not elect their officials, but that they organised a lottery to decide who temporarily held political power (Hansen, 2021; Ober, 2017). Although we intuitively tend to assume that democracy and elections go hand in hand, to the Athenians elections were completely foreign. This is – arguably – because for them it was obvious that the more erudite, rich, or influential in any other sense would have a bigger chance to be elected, and this would (in turn) again reinstall aristocracy (i.e. inequality) (cf. Van Reybrouck, 2016). Drawing names out of a hat is obviously more risky (in that someone completely incompetent could become co-responsible for the polis), but by doing this one simultaneously installs radical equality, suspends all the differences between citizens, and counts everyone as one (again). Also, one puts emphasis on the legal order, the procedures, and the citizenship of many,

rather than on particular persons' extraordinary qualities. Hence, in its incipient form democracy is not fair – it is a matter of organizing pure chance.

This is not to say that in Athenian democracy voting was inexistent. However, and crucially, voting was not about – as it is in our democratic societies – a matter of electing representatives to form legislative power that votes in our place. Instead, voting was a matter of the gathered people on the agora, to collectively decide on the laws that keep the Athenian city together, as we already pointed out with the help of the work of Hannah Arendt (1958). Voting was not about appointing officials, but about coming to concerted decisions regarding a particular issue being under deliberation. Therefore, democratic politics, the way it existed at its origins, is to be seen as a particular arrangement that enables people to deal with the world collectively, a form of *Umgang*, where people gather around some-*thing* they consider important for all, i.e. a matter that goes beyond their private interests (like whether to declare a war, or to build a new gate to the city). They gather around it and try to come to terms with the matter at hand together, i.e. they try to gain possibly the most exhaustive understanding of it, in order to arrive at a decision on living well together in relation to this thing, i.e. to arrive at a decision about the polis. As we argued elsewhere (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2022) this is precisely why democratic *Umgang* requires teacherly gestures and involves the emergence of a studious public, connecting the spheres of education and politics in a non-instrumental way at an ontological plane.

Adding to this, Adrianna Cavarero (2021), in her insightful study on Arendt's thought, notes that participating in this collective effort comes with 'happiness' (pp. 31-41). Democratic deliberation, which always entails that we study together *a thing that gathers and divides us* (Latour 2005) and work out a joint decision about it, is the origin of joy and fulfilment, even though the acts of deliberation may involve agonism, pain and frustration (cf. Cavarero, 2021, pp. 12-14). Democratic deliberation brings public happiness, also because it requires that people are free to speak out and challenge their own convictions, that people are open to have their experiences (sometimes painfully) challenged by other's people insights, etc. Only then, gathering and discussing the matter at hand, something can change about how we understand the deliberated matter, and is it possible that our capabilities to make a right decision about it are improved. In other words, democratic deliberation makes no sense if interlocutors do not acknowledge and expose themselves to the possibility of a genuine transformation. Engaging in such a deliberation involves a risk of being changed and requires us to accept that we all can be changed, that our convictions (regardless of how much we are attached to them) are by nature

particular (not-absolute, not-universal), i.e. in need of other particular insights that put light on the side of the matter that is still hidden from our own sight.

Hence, taming this transformative potentiality of democratic deliberation by taking a particular issue out of public sight for the sake of social justice is – not only antieducational (as we argued above) – but also essentially antidemocratic. This is because it is then *a priori* assumed that some insights count more than others, and that, therefore, some people are allowed to decide for others which issues will not be considered as suitable for public deliberation. All this dovetails with the currently dominant political discourse which holds that suspending social identity markers is either impossible and/or undesirable (as it is believed that we have the obligation to point out how these markers are at the basis of the unfair and oppressive social status quo).

Therefore, according to this dominant view, the radical arithmetic equality that, as we argued, lies at the heart of democracy, should be refuted. This means that people are not counted as one. Out of the best of intentions, a new form of inequality is introduced – this time (it is claimed) a just inequality: some people count more than others, precisely because they are (or were) marginalised, oppressed, enslaved, and we need to hear their voices more than others, i.e. we need to take care of their feelings more than others, in order to make the balance even again. To be clear, we don't want to discuss here whether this ideal is a justified or a wrong one – we just want to make the observation that this dominant view is lethal to democracy, as much as it is for education.

Focusing exclusively on social justice, universalising its logic, and elevating this discourse to a hegemonic ideal that comes to rule every sphere of our lives is dangerous. Well-meant as it might be, this attitude makes us avoid matters that carry with them the suffering of the oppressed and marginalised. As such, we are no longer exposed to certain things (such as the museum piece that was removed), and this means in ontological terms that we are locked away in a limited world ordered by what makes sense to the current police order in the name of social justice.¹

¹ It is no coincidence to us that this view has received so much traction in a time of pervasive digitization, e.g. *in the form of* personalized *news-feeds* that only show us things tailored to our already existing and well recognized interests and preferences, or AI algorithms generating texts with in-built political correctness so that nobody gets hurt, shocked, or – for that matter – challenged in their worldview. In other words, the logic of social justice seems more aligned with the digital sphere than with democracy or education (see Vlieghe and Zamojski, in press).

Conclusion: a matter of trust in the world

What we said so far boils down to the fact that a view that puts social justice in the centre comes with thing-avoidance and focuses all attention on the social markers of our (supposedly) indisposable identities (i.e. identities we cannot get rid of). This view replaces the world for personal opinions we have about the world. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we always take these markers with us, and they determine who we are, what we are able to, what we are allowed to do and to say, and how much our voice counts. In order to bring back justice we now need to value more voices of people that are and/or were marginalised, oppressed and enslaved in the past – their voices have to count for more than the voices of people with markers of identity recognized as privileged. There is no longer a sphere in human life where our identities can be suspended and radical arithmetical equality can be established. Therefore, there are certain things, issues and matters that can no longer become *public* things: as they cause harm, suffering and the oppression, they should be taken out of our sight.

Our claim is that at an ontological level this view opposes the logics of education and of democracy. Despite the fundamental differences between both, education and democratic politics have in common that they are essentially thing-centred, as they involve practices of gathering around a matter that is collectively studied. In other words, there is a thing, both in democracy and education, that is recognized as important and in that sense: potentially interesting to all gathered people (regardless of who they are). And exactly, what is of importance is the thing itself and not the gathered people. This is to say that all are invited to study this thing together and to contribute to its widening understanding. In the case of democracy, within this deliberation no voice can be privileged a priori, since all are rendered as essentially particular. Hence, everyone counts as one: radical arithmetic equality is installed. In the case of education, this equality is of a different nature, and stems from the fact that over and against a thing we are all rendered students (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019).

Given that education and democracy share practices of gathering a public around a thing to study it collectively as the backbone of their otherwise different *Umgänge*, these practices bring about a particular confidence in the world. This is what Martin Wagenschein (1956) remarkably grasped with the German term *Weltvertrauen*. The logic of thing-avoidance starts from and reproduces a fundamental distrust in the world as dangerous, evil, unjust and potentially harmful.

A specifically post-critical way of dealing with democracy, social justice and education consists of overcoming distrust for the world and hence paying collectively attention to things so that we have a world held in common. As Mario Di Paolantonio notes:

At issue [in democracy] is a thinking sparked from what calls us to *sense together* the worth of *sustaining something temporally durable* [...] that, in turn, offers possibilities for enduring and even defeating the senseless brutality of *kratos* [i.e. the possibility inherent in democracy to degenerate into mere governance and violence – added by authors]. Such a thinking concerns itself with tending to those worldly things that with forethought we *pledge* to cherish and sustain in common, and which have sense and worth because, in outlasting one's own brief turn on earth, they offer something more than those surges of violence [i.e. *kratos*, blind governance – added by authors] meant to confirm our meaninglessness, fleetingness and destituteness. Because democracy invites us to appear and to count ourselves as accountable in *a world made durable with others* (a world built so that we may in turn make sense together, and not just fleeting noises) it necessitates thinking of ourselves as being temporarily bound to one another, as being capable of *making and keeping promises* amid the uncertainty of what is 'to come' [a-venir]. (28-29, italics in original)

For democracy to flourish “the possibility of receiving and ‘passing on’ to one another” (29) is a crucial condition. Democracy has a temporal dimension which is structured by passing on and being collectively concerned about some-thing. The common concern for *things* over the generations (i.e. public *heritage*) makes politics into *democratic* politics. Therefore, both education and democracy refer to the durability of the world which in itself is something one can rely on. In that sense, engaging in educational practices and practices of democratic politics builds *trust in the world*, a sense of being at home in the world - a home we all care about. As we have shown in this article, the dominant understanding of social justice departs from distrust in the world involving thing-avoidance and leading towards world destruction, not to the world's durability. That is why the choice between thing-avoidance and *trust in the world* is today crucial.

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Weaving Justice into the Fabric of Post-Critical Perspective on Education

by *Astrid Meczowska-Christiansen**

Abstract

This paper investigates the potential of integrating the concept of justice into the post-critical theory of education. Drawing on the resonance of Hannah Arendt's ideas within post-critical pedagogy, and acknowledging the communal dimension inherent in education, I propose the inclusion of justice as an essential element in post-critical educational discourse. The analysis critically engages with the ontological foundations of Arendt's reflections on education, assessing their implications for the status of justice from a post-critical perspective. While Arendt's strict delineation between the ontologies of politics and education presents a challenge to the straightforward application of justice within a post-critical perspective, this paper argues that justice remains vital for addressing the communal and ethical dimensions of education – as both a concern for the common world and an axiomatic affirmation of the subject's capabilities in terms of equality, with the latter framed through a Rancièrian lens. To this end, I draw on alternative philosophical perspectives, particularly that of Alain Badiou, whose ideas are already integrated into the post-critical perspective on education, to explore pathways for incorporating justice into post-critical framework.

Keywords: Justice; education; post-critical theory of education; the political; ontology of education; ethics.

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The emergence of a post-critical theory of education in recent years marks a clear shift towards a revival of the “pedagogy of positivity.” After decades

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dominated by a critical pedagogy focused on demystifying the dark sides of education and social conditions underlying it – particularly in its role in reproducing and perpetuating social inequalities – this new approach turns toward the affirmation of the world. From the perspective of post-critical pedagogy, education becomes an expression of love for the world. This positivity is reflected in the discovery, recognition, and celebration of the world and its values (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017).

Post-critical theory, following Latour (2004), rejects the negativism inherent in criticism that turns against the world and reinforces the belief that «Evil is our inevitable fate» (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020, p. 866). From the perspective of post-critical theorists, such criticism only fosters a sense of hatred towards the world. Despite this, proponents of post-critical theory do not entirely reject or negate the contributions of the critical tradition in education. In fact, they acknowledge and appreciate its accomplishments in the field of unmasking mechanisms of oppression and discrimination within education. Furthermore, they recognize certain shared elements between post-critical and critical perspectives, particularly the belief in education's transformative potential for renewing the world (Hodgson et al., 2017). However, Vlieghe and Zamojski (2020) describe these two theoretical approaches as mutually exclusive.

Within post-critical pedagogy itself, at least two positions emerge regarding the valuation of the critical pedagogy tradition. The first, a “strong” version, is articulated by Vlieghe and Zamojski (2020), while the second, a “weaker” stance, is expressed by scholars like Ergas (2017, p. 58) who claims that «Education certainly requires a response to relevant issues of inequality and oppression raised by critical theorists; nevertheless, there is also a need to introduce a balancing positivity (...)». The latter suggests that, while education must address issues of inequality and oppression raised by critical theorists, there is also a need to introduce a balancing element of positivity. This “weaker” version of post-criticism leans toward the idea that the two perspectives could complement each other.

A distinction can be made between the weak and strong versions of post-criticality, with this paper focusing on the strong variant of post-critical theory of education. This version is understood as being based on the reversal and negation of the assumptions of “critical critique” (see Stańczyk, 2021), as represented in the conception of North American critical pedagogy, particularly in the approach presented by Giroux and McLaren in the last two decades of the 20th century (Giroux, 1983; Giroux, 1988; Giroux, 2001; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; McLaren, 1995; McLaren, 1997).

A strong version of post-criticism not only denies the significance of critique, which, in Latour's view, has «run out of steam» (Latour, 2004, p.

225) and «found itself totally disarmed» (Latour, 2004, p. 232), but also detaches itself from the categories that constitute the ontological foundations of emancipatory critique. These categories – such as emancipation, equality or inequality, oppression, exclusion, and certainly justice – are viewed as belonging to the domain of politics that has nothing to do with education. In doing so, post-criticism draws inspiration from the philosophy of Jaques Rancière¹, who invokes Jacotot's ideas on universal teaching, which rest on the assumption of the equality of intelligence (Rancière, 1991). This raises yet another argument against critique: since education is founded on the axiomatic assumption of equality among its participants – an equality situated in the realm of educational ontology – emancipatory critique, when directed at the ontic locus of educational practices, becomes increasingly invalid. To quote the authors of *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*:

What is unique about education is the assumption of a radical equality that is indeed lacking in most other societal contexts and situations. This equality is guaranteed because teacher and student devote themselves to a subject matter to such a degree that both are under the authority of this thing (which makes them relate to one another as equals). Put otherwise: educational and sociological equality belong to different spheres of life (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017, p. 84).

Alongside the emancipatory critique, in the perspective of post-critical theory of education, justice is embedded in the emancipatory order and is viewed as another manifestation of the politicization of education. Furthermore, the emancipatory dream, which embraces the ideal of justice, is seen as a form of pedagogical escapism, disengaging from the world as it is (and as it is deemed worthy of our unconditional affirmation). As Vlieghe and Zamojski put it:

The logic of emancipation entails a mode of relating to the world that consists of a double struggle. This struggle is at the same time with the existing structures of the world, and for the desired form of the world. The first stems from what emancipation logically assumes (i.e. that there is slavery, injustice, oppression and exploitation), whereas the second is the great promise that is implied (the current state of our world is not necessary: there can be freedom, justice and equality). This duality also has a

¹ Representatives of post-critical pedagogy, however, seem to have stripped Rancière's concept of its emancipatory and political connotations (see Rancière, 1991; Biesta & Bingham, 2010). For instance, Rancière argues: «We know, in fact, that explication is not only the stultifying weapon of pedagogues but the very bond of the social order. Whoever says order says distribution into ranks. Putting into ranks presupposes explication, the distributive, justificatory fiction of an inequality that has no other reason for being» (Rancière, 1991, p. 117).

temporal dimension, in that evil is part of the present, and that the promise of a better world to come is deferred to the future. The world as it is, *hic et nunc*, is therefore denounced in the name of the future (Vlieghe, Zamojski, 2019, pp. 82-83).

Emancipatory fixation on unattainable ideals is also criticized for being unproductive because, as Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski (2018, p. 10) state, «there will always be power relations, there will always be inequality, oppression, and injustice.» Furthermore, it paves the way to cynicism towards the world (Hodgson et al., 2018, pp. 10, 12). From the post-critical perspective, all “political” (in fact, power-related) contexts of education are perceived as undermining its proper essence, which, proponents argue, should be grounded in a disinterested love of the world (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020). This is the power of “disinterested love” that seems to alienate education from its sociopolitical and discursive contexts. It not only rejects the emancipatory endeavors of education², but also undermines its axiological foundations, for which the issue of justice (in its various theoretical or philosophical contexts) seems profound. Such axiological foundations are typical not only of critical pedagogy and its Marxist provenance, but also of pedagogical progressivism, which was nourished by the idea of education for democracy (see Dewey, 2011; 2020). In refusing to conceive of education in external, i.e., instrumental terms, post-critical pedagogy follows in the footsteps of Hannah Arendt, who opposes education to politics and advocates for the defense of education against politics (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 8; Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020). An over-reliance, I would argue, on a rather literal reading of Arendt’s ideas on education, as articulated in her essay *The Crisis in Education* (Arendt, 1993), seems to ultimately obstruct the possibility of including the category of justice within the ontological field on which post-critical theory of education operates.

Ontological presuppositions and axiological implications resulting from Arendt’s vision of education, as distinct not only from politics but also excluded from the public realm, seem to profoundly demonstrate the impossibility of constructing any educational theory that would take into consideration the subjectivity, dignity, and rights of its participants. Arendt’s perspective, as expressed in *The Crisis in Education*, seems to represent a series of pedagogical fictions.

² It is important to note that the issue of emancipation does not need to be understood solely from the perspective promoted by critical pedagogy. In fact, within the philosophical frameworks of Rancière and Badiou, often referenced in post-critical theory of education, we also encounter emancipatory themes. However, these frameworks ascribe different meanings to emancipatory logic (cf. Hewlett, 2007; Biesta, 2010).

Firstly, for Arendt, education is addressed only to children. Adults do not need education – unlike children, who are not yet complete human beings (Arendt, 1993, p. 187). In politics, as Arendt argues, «we always have to deal with those who are already educated», adding that «whoever wants to educate adults really wants to act as their guardian and prevent them from political activity» (Arendt, 1993, p. 177). Therefore, it can be viewed that, for Arendt, education constitutes a form of disempowerment and exclusion of subjective agency in the public sphere.

Secondly, Arendt creates a naturalistic and infantilized portrait of the child and childhood, denying the possibility of attributing to childhood categories such as freedom, agency, and subjectivity – attributes that, in her view, refer only to adults who become subjectified in the realm of the political. Children, even if endowed with the potential of natality, are not yet capable of public participation. Furthermore, Arendt recognizes «that childhood is a temporary stage, a preparation for adulthood» (Arendt, 1993, p. 184), clearly highlighting the fundamental inequality at the heart of the pedagogical relationship: between the (competent) adult and the (incompetent) child. In this respect, Arendt commits what Rancière considers to be a pedagogical fiction – that is, «the representation of inequality as a retard in one's [a child's, A.M.-Ch.] development» (Rancière, 1991, p. 119).

A comprehensive reading of *The Crisis in Education* gives the impression of a naive psychologization of the image of childhood, as noted by Gert Biesta, who observes that «Arendt fell prey to a mistake that is not uncommon when philosophers turn to education», where «the only available vocabulary for talking about education is a psychological one» (Biesta, 2014, pp. 103-104). Expanding on Biesta's argument, one may argue that Arendt shares Kant's view on the pre-intellectual and pre-moral status of childhood (Kant, 1900). Hence, children are not deemed to possess attributes such as subjectivity and freedom, which Arendt associates with members of the community – i.e., political subjects. Apart from the private sphere of family life, the only context in which these immature beings can engage without exerting a potentially destructive impact on the world is within an education system grounded in authority, which stands in contrast to public life. Thus, while «the meaning of politics is freedom» (Arendt, 2005, p. 108), the meaning of education is authority.

It is, however, difficult to fully agree with Biesta's claim that, in Arendt's perspective, both “childhood” and “adulthood” are inherently natural categories rather than products of social and political construction (Biesta, 2014, pp. 103-104). Arendt situates adults within a moral and political framework tied to the status of persona (citizen), while viewing children within a naturalistic context that aligns with the notion of humans “to be

born” (as related to her concept of “natality”). Thus, Arendt’s conception of childhood appears not to be primarily inspired by the “folk developmental psychologies” of her time, but rather to closely align with Kantian philosophy. Furthermore, consistent with Kant, she seems to assume that children, as pre-moral beings, lack the inherent dignity required to claim rights. Consequently, akin to her contention that dignity is denied to individuals without citizenship – since the latter is derived solely from the community (Arendt, 1971, p. 302; a viewpoint subject to debate, see: Benhabib, 2018, pp. 21, 186; Menke, 2014)³ – children, being detached from the public realm (and not yet capable of participating in it), cannot be considered subjects of dignity, nor can they claim justice, which derives from dignity. Thus, children cannot be regarded as holders of rights, despite – as Korsgaard (2018) argues – being entitled to care. From the perspective of contemporary cultural sensibilities, shaped not only by political correctness but also by a heightened sensitivity to human dignity, irrespective of age, nationality, or any other characteristic, Arendt’s stance on this issue seems rather problematic.

Thirdly, Arendt seems to fall into yet another pedagogical myth which, through Rancière’s lens, divides the world into two: the knowing and the ignorant, the mature and the unformed (Rancière, 1991). The central role of adult authority in children’s education tends to equate education with mere explication – a notion highlighted by Rancière to illustrate the nature of the pedagogical (and not only pedagogical) relationship, which is based on the submission of “the ignorant” to an authoritative interpretation of truth and unconditional obedience to “the knowing”. As for Simons and Masschelein, «to explain something to someone is, first of all, to show him he cannot understand it by himself (...). Explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones (...) the intelligent and the stupid» (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p. 510).

It is worth noting that a vision of education based on explicative practices is, as McCreary comments, «not simply a method of teaching, but a form of social organization» (McCreary, 2021, p. 745). Thus, incorporating Arendt’s concept of education, based on the authority of the teacher, into the domain of post-critical theory of education will inevitably remain entangled within

³ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt expresses the above as follows: «The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself – and different in general, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance» (Arendt, 1971, p. 302).

the mechanisms of social structuring that govern educational interactions and perpetuate dynamics of domination and subordination. The latter forms a field of intentional overshadowing, which aligns with the axiom of radical equality (concerning the capacity for thinking) that accompanies educational practices (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, pp. 46-54).

Arendt's perspective on education can be characterized as grounded in an unconditional love for the world, yet simultaneously marked by an a priori disregard for the dignity of children. This stems from Arendt's belief that dignity, and by extension justice, forms the ontological foundation of the political realm⁴ and is thus not inherent to the domain of education. For Arendt, justice seems intimately tied to the capacity of individuals to act freely and responsibly in the public world, and it arises from the recognition of the dignity of all human beings – different, yet equal. It is worth noting, however, that for Arendt:

[w]e are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights. Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals (Arendt, 1971, p. 301).

Thus, for Arendt, justice is predominantly related to human equality: «we link equality with the concept of justice» (Arendt, 2005, p. 118). She believed that the only possible domain of justice is the public realm, where individuals engage in dialogue, debate, and collective decision-making, and where the plurality of human perspectives intersects, fostering the conditions for meaningful engagement in political processes. Such a notion of justice, however, does not pertain to education, which, in her view, has nothing to do with the political or the public. Yet, a significant connection emerges within Arendt's philosophy, linking both politics and education: *Amor Mundi*, the love of the world.

In her letter to Karl Jaspers, written on August 6, 1955, Arendt wrote: «I've begun so late, really only in recent years, to truly love the world that I shall be able to do that now. I want to call my book on political theories *Amor Mundi*» (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992, p. 264) – love for the world. For Arendt, love to the world means love to the public realm; as she puts it:

⁴ It is worth mentioning that Arendt does not develop a systematic theory of justice; however, the concept seems to be silently scattered throughout her writings. In the context of Arendt's work, the ideal of justice is linked to concepts such as human plurality and equality, freedom, action in the public sphere, and, most importantly, responsibility and love for the common world.

[T]he term “public” signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished for our privately owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time (Arendt 1958, p. 52).

A paradoxical dualism seems to arise from the dissonance between Arendt’s political writing and her, rather incidental, thoughts on education. In a literal reading of *The Crisis in Education*, education, as an expression of love for the public world, is positioned outside of it; participants in education are not part of the public realm and therefore do not share the powers or attributes of political actors. Yet, paradoxically, by isolating itself from the public sphere and distancing itself from all forms of public participation, education is simultaneously tasked with preparing individuals to take part in it⁵.

But does this kind of conceptualization fully align with the assumptions of post-critical pedagogy? Can an educational situation, where we gather as equals around a table in shared wonder of things, truly be excluded from the public sphere while also – following Arendt – being excluded from the communal aspect of life? Perhaps, within the post-critical perspective, the communal aspect of education is not only possible but also necessary – especially when considering the following declaration: «Here, we start from the assumption that we can speak and act – together» (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 16)? Doesn’t the principle of love for the world, as proclaimed in post-critical pedagogy, demand a break with Arendt’s equation of the communal, the public, and the political, as well as her positioning of children as “non-political” subjects belonging to the realm of things? If so, recognizing the communal dimension in education within post-critical theory seems to call for exploring the possibility of incorporating the category of justice into post-critical theoretical discourse.

In line with a post-critical orientation, however, it is not a matter of understanding justice in terms of a social ideal of equality. Instead, the very idea of love for the world, with its emphasis on its public nature, requires

⁵ By the same token, this raises the question of the teacher’s own public participation. Does being a teacher – an ‘equal among equals’, according to the axiom of radical equality – who sits alongside the children at the table, gathered in appreciation of things, exclude the teacher from public participation?

education to be deontologically oriented toward “doing justice to the world” – which refers to care, respect, and ethical engagement. The concept of justice that seems relevant here is the Aristotelian ideal of universal justice (Aristotle, 1926), where justice concerns *What We Owe to Each Other* (see Scanlon, 1988) as the domain of morality dealing with our duties to other people. It involves not only a desire to act fairly toward others. Considering the Aristotelian idea of universal justice, the concept of justice may be interpreted as an ethical relation to others and, at the same time, to the common world.

Aristotle distinguishes between universal (or “general”) justice and particular (or “partial”) forms of justice, where the latter produces or secures happiness for the political community. Justice, understood this way, is a virtue exhibited in relation to others, while promoting the good life and happiness of community members: «[I]t involves relationship with someone else, accounts for the view that Justice alone of the virtues is ‘the good of others,’ because it does what is for the advantage of another, either a ruler or an associate» (Aristotle, 1926, p. 261). Aristotle conceives of justice in terms of its relationship to virtue, viewing it as the highest form of moral excellence manifested through our attitude towards others: «Justice, then, is perfect Virtue, though with a qualification, namely that it is displayed towards others. This is why justice is often thought to be the chief of the virtues, or more sublime than the evening or the morning star» (Aristotle, 1926, p. 259). As Aristotle emphasizes, it is important to note that justice does not constitute a virtue *per se* but is rather a form of its expression: «[T]he distinction between Virtue and Justice becomes clear from what has been said: they are the same quality of mind, but their essence is different; what is displayed in relation to others is Justice, while simply being a disposition of a certain kind is Virtue» (Aristotle, 1926, p. 261)⁶.

Building on the earlier discussion, the Aristotelian concept of universal justice can be connected to the idea of “gathering at the table over a thing” as an expression of concern for the common world. It can also relate to the assumption of radical equality regarding the capacity for thinking, which serves as a core element of post-critical educational theory. “What we owe to each other”, then, becomes a recognition of individuals’ potentials and capabilities that enable the unconstrained freedom to study, initiate actions, inquire, and explore. Justice, in this sense, might be acknowledged as a

⁶ In contrast, partial justice concerns the share of benefits individuals should receive and the burdens they should bear – such as honor, material goods, and security. Common interpretations of Aristotle’s theory of justice often emphasize partial justice, particularly in relation to the concepts of justice and reciprocity, as well as Aristotle’s views on distributive and corrective justice (see Johnston, 2011, pp. 63-89).

precondition for purely educational efforts to gather people around a common thing – «that is, something appearing in the world that is made available to a new generation» (Masschelein & Simons, 2013, p. 10). This egalitarian aspect of the axiomatic recognition of the equality of participants' capabilities in an educational situation, along with the conviction that disinterested ethical engagement forms the precondition of education, can be linked to the conceptualization of justice by Alain Badiou». According to Badiou, «justice, which is the theoretical name for an axiom of equality, necessarily refers to a wholly disinterested subjectivity (Badiou, 2006, p. 100). Nevertheless, this philosopher – an inspiring figure for the proponents of post-critical theory of education – relates his concept of justice to the ethical dimension of politics. For Badiou «politics worthy of being interrogated by philosophy under the idea of justice is one whose unique general axiom is: people think, people are capable of truth, adding that «it is the strictly egalitarian recognition of the capacity for truth» (Badiou, 2006, p.98)⁷. As with the concept of equality – in both Badiou's philosophy and post-critical pedagogy – justice is not treated as an empirical or sociological reality. Justice is not an empirical concept. The plane of reference for this concept is neither social structure nor phenomena relating to the distribution of power, the production of hierarchy, or domination. Nor is it tied to a political agenda or emancipatory aspiration. As Badiou asserts, «moreover, it has nothing to do with the social» (Badiou, 2006, p. 99). Like equality, justice has no objective meaning here and cannot be defined (Badiou, 2006, p. 99).

What seems to most strongly link Badiou's concept of justice, as it relates to his notion of politics that deals with truth, to post-critical perspective on education is the potential to view justice as an affirmation of the subject's capabilities. For Badiou this becomes especially relevant in situations of uncertainty, confrontation with the unknown, dissensus, and inconsistency. Such experiences often accompany young people as they navigate their way into the world. Within Badiou's perspective, justice refers specifically to situations where claims of truth within institutional discourses are suspended, where finalist strategies and intentional pedagogical aims are invalidated; where both the subject of politics, and a student confronting the mystery of the world as an object of love, discovers that «reality is not simply there, it does not simply exist: it must be sought out and won»⁸. This

⁷ I am referring here to "the political" in opposition to what Rancière describes as "police." What is at stake, then, is not state-driven politics and its agendas, but rather a «politics that touches on truths» (Badiou, 2006, p. 100).

⁸ This quote is commonly attributed to Paul Celan in popular online sources. However, despite thorough searching, I have not been able to pinpoint its exact origin. I was led to Paul Celan

imperative: «reality must be sought out and won» – leads us back to Hannah Arendt and her vision of education.

While many of the ideas or claims expressed in *The Crisis of Education* are open to debate, the notion of “seeking out and winning the world,” which I find already present within Arendt’s perspective, can be understood not only as an educational endeavor but also as an expression of justice. This justice emerges through the recognition of young people’s potential to contribute to the renewal of a shared world, but it also relates to the world as an object of love and care. As Arendt reminds us: «[education] should not strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world» (Arendt, 1993, p. 177).

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by Badiou himself, who wrote that this poet «provides us with the most precise image of ‘justice’ in the following poem» (Badiou, 2006, pp. 106-107), an excerpt of which reads: «Support yourself by inconsistencies (...); a world rushes up, this depends on you» (Celan, 1976, as cited in Badiou, 2006, pp. 106-107).

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Affirming Epistemic Equality in Pedagogical Relationships: Outlining Theory and Practice

by *Aline Nardo* *

Abstract

This paper sketches the outlines of a pedagogy for epistemic justice that aims to embody epistemic equality axiomatically, rather than pursuing it as an aim. To do so, the paper draws from a post-critical lens and engages with the perspectives of Rancière, Roth, and Heidegger.

Keywords: epistemic justice; equality; dwelling; poetry; pedagogy.

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Introduction

The *Manifesto for Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) states a «belief in the possibility of transformation, as found in critical theory and pedagogy, but with an affirmative attitude.» (p. 15) When conceiving of an education oriented towards social justice we cannot be satisfied with simply affirming social justice as a principle or value; affirmative practices that are conducive to social justice must follow. In this paper, I reflect on the question of what such practices could look like in a post-critical lens and ask, in particular, what it would mean to embody social justice within pedagogical relationships.

More traditionally “critical” perspectives – and the policy initiatives emerging from them – are often focused on the role of education in *remediating* existing social injustices. To remediate, following the online Cambridge Dictionary, means «to correct something that is wrong or damaged, or to improve a bad situation». The educational intervention, following such an approach, happens after the fact, i.e., after the injustice has

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occurred. In terms of practice, critical approaches are often focused on highlighting injustices and the systemic dynamics perpetuating them, including in formal education settings, and bringing them into people's awareness. Understanding systemic injustice and oppression, in such a view, can itself be considered an emancipatory practice (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 25). Other practices of remediation include additional support or special allowances for certain groups of students that are disadvantages within a specific system – such as for example within initiatives such as “No Child Left Behind” in the US (Feldman & Tyson, 2014) – with the aim of achieving equal educational outcomes for all, or at least enable equal access to quality schooling.

This paper's discussion builds on the following well-described problem: if we understand the role of education in relation to social justice primarily in terms of remediation or repair, we accept social inequality as a fundamental fact, as a given. The fact that it is built on an assumption of inequality, rather than equality, makes the idea of remediation in social justice education potentially problematic. The same problem applies to the pedagogical relationship underpinning the above-described approaches to social justice education grounded in a critical perspective: the critical pedagogue, functioning as the “emancipator”, assumes an inherently superior position when relating to their students, i.e., “the oppressed”. The pedagogue is believed to know the systems of oppression and understand the tools for liberation. «It becomes the task of the critical educator to make visible what is hidden for those who are “object” of the emancipatory endeavours of the critical educator» (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 26). In such an understanding of the pedagogical relationship, inequality is assumed; it is the basic structure defining the relationship and the aims of education. Yet, to assume inequality means to create and perpetuate inequality as it renders emancipation into something that is done to “the oppressed” by “the emancipator”.

In response to this problem, the questions I want to engage with in this paper is: how might a post-critical lens help us to reconceive the role of education in relation to social justice from *remediating injustice* to *affirming and embodying equality* at the heart of the pedagogical relationship?

In keeping with the theme of the symposium titled *Affirming social justice in education? Post-critical vistas* at the *Scuola Democratica* Conference in Cagliari in 2024, from which this paper emerged, the discussion engages with a post-critical perspective. The focus is on exploring the motive of affirmation as a basic feature of a pedagogy that embodies justice instead of seeking to remediate existing injustices. Therein, the ensuing exploration takes inspiration also from Rancière's (1991) argument that «equality, in

general, is not an end to be attained. It is a point of departure, a presupposition to be verified by sequences of specific acts» (cited from Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p. 9). I contend that to define such “specific acts”, as pointed out also by McCreary (2021), rather than defining a new set of ‘best practices’ or «a discursive form to be emulated» (p. 755), we must envision what a deeper embodiment of equality at the heart of the pedagogical relationship might look like. The thoughts articulated in this paper should be read as an exploration of such a perspective, rather than a proposition or advocacy of specific teaching approaches. The aim is to see also whether it is possible to affirm equality as an axiom without the need to prescribe well-defined forms of expression and pedagogical procedures that would undergird such equality (as that would potentially reintroduce the original problem in which one has to be enabled by “the emancipator” to perform in specific ways within a given system which is understood by “the emancipator” but not by the “to be emancipated”). To explore what this might look like, I will draw from Rancière’s notion of the ignorant schoolmaster, Roth’s thinking surrounding a science education that aims to “root” rather than “uproot”, and Heidegger’s notion of the “poetic dwelling”, which he uses to describe a particular language oriented towards authenticity and responsiveness in our relationships with others (Nardo, 2025).

As I explore the idea of a social justice pedagogy that fundamentally affirms equality, I focus on epistemic injustice. First coined by Miranda Fricker (2007), the term “epistemic injustice” refers to both the problem of an individual failing to receive equal recognition as a «knower» (testimonial injustice) and the lack of «collective interpretative resources» (p. 1) to make sense of certain social experiences (hermeneutic injustice). Testimonial injustice concerns situations when a person receives less credibility because of, for example, underlying sexist or racist biases. An example might be a police officer not believing someone, or believing someone less because they are a person of colour. Hermeneutic injustice often presents, for example, in relation to instances of sexual harassment in a culture where such a concept is lacking. Epistemic injustice is a form of discrimination from which many «secondary wrongs» (Fricker 2007), such as marginalisation, follow. It is therefore a matter of concern for an education oriented towards social justice.

Remediating Epistemic Injustice

The implications of epistemic injustice in formal education contexts have been discussed widely, in both theory and policy discourses. The UNESCO’s report *Reimagining our Futures Together* (2021), for example, considers

different manifestations of epistemic injustice in relation to education at length. One focus of the report is higher education, where, as it is stated, we continue to observe «distinctive ways of organizing, validating» that «legitimiz[e] certain forms of knowledge production» (p. 76). Unequal access and recognition, the report details, span across practices of knowledge distribution via the scholarly publishing industry, which favours certain languages and culturally non-neutral forms of expression, as well as the requirements of the scientific method itself. Concepts such as reliability and validity, the report stresses, are not culturally neutral, privileging some scholarly traditions over others. Moreover, «indigenous knowledges and modes of knowledge generation and sharing have generally been considered an object, rather than a form, of research» (p. 76) .

UNESCO's report *Reimagining our Futures Together* (2021) adopts a remediative approach to epistemic injustice in education, evoking primarily the notion of “repair”. It urges that «a new social contract for education – inspired by principles of social, epistemic, economic and environmental justice» (p. 119) must be created. Such a social contract, the report continues, should «*repair* injustices while transforming the future» (p. 3, my emphasis). Education ought to «prioritize deliberate, thoughtful engagement with knowledge [which] helps to build epistemic, cognitive and *reparative* justice» (p. 65, my emphasis). Practically this means, according to the report, that higher education curricula should focus more on pluralising different knowledges and forms of knowing. This can be achieved, for example, by opposing knowledge hegemonies and increasing young people's literacy on different levels (scientific, ethical, critical), or by educating teachers to foster engagement with diverse bodies of knowledge. In terms of pedagogy, the UNESCO report states further that «pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity [...] based on shared principles of non-discrimination, respect for diversity, and reparative justice» (p. 58) are required, centred on «participatory, collaborative, problem-posing, and interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and intercultural learning» (p. 58).

While there is nothing categorically objectionable with UNESCO wanting to repair past and perpetually continuing epistemic injustices, it is important to note the difference between its proposed approach, and practices that foreground the encounter of different forms of knowledge production and presentation under the assumption of equality, in the sense of Rancière. Seeking to *repair* injustice, following a Rancièrian perspective, means to start with inequality rather than equality. Interestingly, as the UNESCO report goes into further specifics about the pedagogical relationship, a more Rancièrian approach emerges: it is stated, for example, that students and teachers should understand themselves and each other as «knowledge-

seekers» (p. 59). Therein, the asymmetry underpinning the idea of the pedagogical relationship consisting of a “repairer” and a “victim of social injustice” is replaced, at least theoretically, with a more equal quest for understanding in a world shared by both teacher and learner. However, when it comes to the question of how that symmetry might be embodied more deeply and consistently in practice, the report does not offer a lot beyond the affirmation of the value of epistemic diversity and pluralism.

Similarly, when it comes to the problem of epistemic injustice, recent discussion in the philosophy of education has focused on a remediative approach, centred around specific mitigative measures in the classroom, curriculum reform with view to cultivate epistemic virtue, and awareness of existing forms of epistemic injustice. Dunne (2022), for example, articulates a need for educators to be aware of their «epistemic duty of care» (Dunne, 2022, p. 285), which includes understanding the issue and developing concrete teaching approaches that mitigate both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Others within the field have focused the structural problems within educational governance and institutions that perpetuate epistemic injustice (Nikolaidis, 2023), or on clarifying what forms of epistemic virtue we should be aiming to cultivate in educational contexts to remediate testimonial injustice (Kotzee & Sato, 2023).

There must not necessarily be a categorical division between remediating approaches focused on the repair of epistemic injustices and what I have described as a “Rancièrian approach”; in practice, they are not mutually exclusive and might complement each other. Yet, philosophically, there is a difference. Here, I am interested in better understanding that difference and reflect on its implications for pedagogy: how might epistemic *equality* be affirmed and embodied within the pedagogical relationship itself? This means, for example, rather than discussing the manifold ways in which education perpetrates epistemic injustice, or constructing a view of education as a means to remediate or mitigate epistemic injustice, I seek to consider what an alternative pedagogy might look like in which equality is an axiom rather than the aim. While the cultivation of specific epistemic virtues and critical awareness doubtlessly plays a role within such a pedagogy, the focus here lies on exploring the possibilities of affirming and embodying epistemic equality at a deeper level. Such a pedagogy is oriented towards equal recognition within the pedagogical relationship in which all participants are equally perceived as “knowers”; it also has to do with presence and valuing authenticity in expression.

Sketching the Outlines of a Pedagogy of “Dwelling”

To draw the outlines of such a pedagogy, I turn to the notion of “dwelling”, with focus on how it was developed by Roth (2018) in relation to how we learn, and science education in particular (Nardo, 2025). The originally Heideggerian concept describes a particular way of being by building, entailing both preserving *and* constructing, that, I believe, may help us to think about what it could mean to ground pedagogical interactions oriented towards epistemic justice in affirmation rather than critique and deconstruction.

Building that contributes to “dwelling”, according to Heidegger, rather than imposing predefined aims and ideals to attain specific forms and outcomes, is responsive to what is present. It means to both preserve and actively construct in relation to what and who is encountered. Rather than a construction as deconstruction, it could be described as a “building on” what is. “Dwelling” is also inherently social, embedded in a world that is always already there, inhabited by other “dwellers”.

With its emphasis on preservation (rather than merely critique and deconstruction), “dwelling” is naturally aligned, I believe, with a post-critical rather than traditionally critical perspective: it foregrounds the need to be truly present to what is and decide what is worth affirming and preserving within what is encountered, while at the same time emphasising that being means to contribute to the further construction of the world as we engage with it. Moreover, “dwelling” is oriented towards what Heidegger (1971) calls «letting dwell» (1971, p. 157) of the self and the other. “Dwelling” does not mean to fit into a certain mould through how one expresses oneself, encountering others through a certain lens or with a certain aim in mind (e.g., “emancipation”). Rather, it has to do with authentic expression and the desire to understand the other’s authentic expression. Neither of these can ever be complete; “dwelling” is necessarily transcendent, constantly moving beyond itself towards what it is not (yet).

Our “dwelling” in the world is also inherently precarious. Various tendencies to objectify ourselves and the other, and fit them and ourselves into existing categories encroach on our presence in the world and our reception of other’s contributions and expressions. To affirm epistemic equality in our encounters with others require constant effort. Forms of epistemic injustice clearly play a role here: the idea of epistemic injustice highlights the fact that prejudice and the inherently exclusionary nature of the available interpretative resources hamper openness and understanding of the world and the people we encounter. “Dwelling” foregrounds the need for openness to the other’s distinct otherness, and for their unique contribution.

To cultivate “dwelling” means to be attuned to the other as a being that constantly brings itself forth outside of existing categories and stereotypes. Doing this is “hard work”; it requires a constant re-examination of established habits of listening and speaking that move us away from authentic encounters. It also requires the fundamental recognition that the other’s and the self’s authentic “presencing” are «simply worth caring for» (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 17).

What would it mean to encounter our students this way? As educators it would mean, first and foremost, to receive their distinct epistemic perspectives with interest, with a desire to preserve and further construct in collaboration with them, rather than the desire to shatter those perspectives or replace them with “what is correct”. When we view the educator not a superior knower, but a dweller alongside other dwellers, we are operating under the assumption of equality.

Roth (2018) considers in detail how this sort of pedagogical interaction might occur in science education, where we expect to be little room for the affirmation of epistemic equality. What do perspectives matter in the face of scientific “facts” and “truths”? According to Roth, “misconceptions”, gaps in understanding, and even the fantastic explanations of how the world works often held by children are inherently valuable; they are inherently worth engaging with and to be preserved. While they do not align with mainstream science, they form an essential part of our ability to wonder at the world and feel at home in it. A sense of belonging and wonder, in turn, motivates us to care for the world and to continue to tend to it. Being at home in the world, following Roth, precedes our ability to build in a way that is conducive to “dwelling”. Non- or even unscientific explanations of the world are what initially root us to our surroundings and enables us to “dwell” in it. In that, they are inherently worthy of being listened to and to be preserved in new forms, as they are being transformed educationally; they contribute to a sense of being at home in the world thus enabling us to participate in its further construction.

Following Roth, the detached perspectives of the Western science canon, impose certain ways of thinking that increase distance between school and the lived reality of students. Children’s ways of knowing and inhabiting the world are often «discredited» (p. 37). “Non-standard” ways of knowing and knowledge production are privileged that exclude particular groups. In contrast, an education oriented towards dwelling implies a different valuation of a child’s original relation with their surroundings. It supports “rooting” by preserving subjective viewpoints, while, simultaneously «keeping [them] in transformed and transforming ways, to associate to [them] the new relations that correspond more closely to science» (Roth,

2018, p. 51). Roth, we gather, is not proposing to simply accept any and every perspective at face value and preserving it unchanged. Rather, his vision has to do with the creation of connections between student's life experiences and the scientific perspective which, as they are encountered and engaged with, tie on to and expand the student's "rooting" in the world. It also has to do with a fundamental rethinking of the pedagogical relationship, and the abandoning the idea of the teacher as someone who's task it is to replace false ideas with correct ones.

As part of a science education that is oriented towards "dwelling", footed on epistemic equality, Roth (2018) emphasises, the teacher must also be aware and teach their students how a scientific mindset, «as significant and fascinating it may be, also constitutes a narrowing of the perspectives that comes from the objectifying rationalist and rationalizing gaze» (p. 52).

There are parallels between Roth's vision of a science education that is conducive to "dwelling" and Rancière's (1991) reflections on the ignorant schoolmaster, where an idea of emancipated learning outside of the structure of "ignorant minds" having things explained to them by "knowing minds" by is explored. In what Rancière calls the "explication model" of teaching, the teacher decides when the act of learning begins. «He decrees the absolute beginning» (p. 6) of learning, implying that what the student knows and has learned before this moment has no relevance or connection to what is supposed to be learned now. The assumption is that «until he [the teacher, A.N.] came along the child has been groping blindly [...] now he will learn» (p. 7). The belief underlying such an assumption, Rancière argues, is that there are two intelligences. The first «registers perceptions by chance, retrains them, interprets and repeats them empirically, within the closed circle of habit and need» (p. 7). This intelligence, assigned to «the child and the common man» (p. 7) is framed as epistemically inferior. Perspectives produced by this intelligence are taken less seriously; they have less value. The second intelligence, perceived and enacted as superior, «knows things by reason, proceeds by method» (p. 7).

The assumed inequality of the intelligences in the pedagogical relationship centred around "explanation" justifies the imposition of one viewpoint over the other. It ignores the fact that the child, too, is on a quest to understand the world and has meaningfully done so in many ways, as discussed also by Roth (2018). As a sidenote, the same principle applies on a socio-cultural level: indigenous and other perspectives that do not conform to the Western ideal of the scientific method are viewed as inferior. This ignores the ways these perspectives have enabled highly functional and potentially much more desirable forms of human-world interaction. The result within the pedagogical relationship, so Rancière's argument, is the dis-

emancipation of the learner, who, rather than applying their own reason, is now increasingly occupied with demonstrating “understanding” of what they have been explained by the teacher.

What the truly emancipating teacher teaches instead, according to Rancière, is that no other intelligence is needed, no superior “knower”, to understand the world. The aim, Rancière writes, is not to «load the memory, [but] form the intelligence» (p. 22). This entails a shift in the pedagogical relationship and the task of the teacher; it does not make the teacher obsolete: «A person – and a child in particular – may need a master when his own will is not strong enough to set him back on track and keep him there» (p. 13). The proposed education is not one directed by the student’s immediate interests or inclinations; the teacher and the subject matter are keeping the student engaged: «The book prevents escape. [...] We know too that the master won’t have the right to stand anywhere else – only at the door. The student must see everything for himself, compare and compare, and always respond to a three-part question: what do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it?» (p. 23). The teacher interrogates, they «demand speech, that is to say, the manifestation of an intelligence that wasn’t aware of itself or that had given up» (p. 29). Following Rancière, this sort of relationship is best achieved by the ignorant schoolmaster, i.e., the teacher who «effectively knows no more than the student» (p. 30). It will otherwise be difficult for them to “verify” students’ utterances without being overly directive and tip into an explanatory approach. Yet, just like Roth (2018), Rancière emphasises that this does not imply a rejection of science, or the creation of «a science of the people as opposed to that of the scholar» (p. 31). What it does mean is that the teacher, instead of correcting and explaining, is focused on the redirection of students’ attention to the «materiality» (p. 32) of the subject matter. The material which functions both as a connector between teacher and student, who are interacting as «two minds at an equal distance» (p. 32), and a source of verification that the teacher can point to. To be able to direct and support processes of learning while also embodying epistemic equality at the basic level, the teacher, Rancière emphasises, must be emancipated themselves, meaning, they «must know [themselves] to be a voyager of the mind [...], an intellectual subject partaking in the power common to intellectual beings». This will entail «a minimum of instruction, drawn from the principles of reason, science, and the general interest» (p. 33).

A pedagogy that embodies epistemic justice is not about creating hierarchies between less and more developed explanations, approaches and ways of thinking: «It is not about opposing manual knowledge, the knowledge of the people, the intelligence of the tool and of the worker, to

the science of schools or the rhetoric of the elite» (p. 36). Rather, the aim is to recognise «that there are not two levels of intelligence, that any human work of art is the practice of the same intellectual potential» (p. 36). On this basis, as articulated by Roth (2018, p. 23), the student starts with what is familiar and then expands their knowing and understanding by engaging with ideas, concepts, theories, disciplines not yet known to them. This way, the student learns «about the interconnected nature of the environment in which he live[s], many aspects of which he had not known before» (p. 23).

Science, in this conception, is neither a heap of facts and procedures or a replacement of previously held “wrong” or “naïve” ideas; rather, it is a means to an end, allowing the student to further expand their belonging to the world they live in, by widening their understanding of it, and, thus, making them more able to act in it. Therein, Roth (2018) writes, «our knowledgeable ways of getting around the world constitute the ground for learning anything else (e.g., in schools)» (p. 37). In reality, «these forms of knowing our way around the world are often discredited» (p. 37). Rancière’s (1991) ignorant schoolmaster works against such tendencies by relating to the student as someone who «in fact already knows innumerable things» (cited from Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 5).

Poetry and Equality

A pedagogy affirming epistemic equality axiomatically, rather than pursuing it as an aim, has, at its core, to do with language; how we express ourselves and how we receive the expressions of other. «There is an equality of speaking beings that comes before the relation of inequality», Rancière (1991, cited from Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 5) writes. To be heard without prejudice is a form of justice; for one’s contributions to be received with curiosity and open-mindedness under the assumption of equality is a form of justice. Injustice is done when this assumed equality is disturbed by established habits of communication and expression that also inherently shape how we receive and interpret other people’s utterances, ideas and understandings – especially when interpretations and habits of interactions are biased or shaped by stereotypes (Dunne, 2022). We must, as stated in the post-critical manifesto, reestablish «our relation to our words, opening them to question» (Hodgson, Vlieghe, Zamojski, 2017, p. 17).

The key role of language and communication emerges from Rancière’s account of the ignorant schoolmaster who, instead of explaining, questions. In a pedagogical relationship that embodies epistemic equality, language and communication must be returned to the purpose of authentic expression and

understanding, rather than explanation. The teacher, Rancière (1991) writes, «is first of all a person who speaks to another, who tells stories and returns the authority of knowledge to the *poetic condition* of all spoken interaction» (cited from Bingham & Biesta 2010, 6; my emphasis). What might be meant by “poetic” here?

Poetry, according to Heidegger (1971), is an essential element of “dwelling” as a way of being. It is, he writes, «what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling» (p. 216). The notion of the poetic captures a way of «responding in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language» (p. 213). It is a way of using language with the aim of authentic expression and understanding. It is the attempt to take “authentic measure” of the world using words: «Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is» (p. 71). Poetic language allows us to exist outside of deeply entrenched and habituated manners of speaking, listening and thinking that distance us from the reality of our surroundings by abstraction. In that, poetry brings forth truth and beauty of a thing by attending to its authentic being (Magrini, 2012); striving for such expression is an act of preservation, of affirmation.

Poetry is also inherently «open and ready for the unforeseen» (Heidegger, 1971, p. 214). It does not begin with the need to standardise and objectify, but with the desire to truly approach and approximate reality through language, outside of established concepts and categories. It entails encountering one’s surroundings in the spirit of openness rather than with the aim of controlling, engineering and directing outcomes. It is a form of non-scientific «authentic measure-taking» in which we encounter something as it is, instead of «mere gauging with ready-made measuring rods for the making of maps» (p. 224). As such, poetry may open other ways of seeing and experiencing that are foreclosed in an exclusively “scientific” perspective; it may create connections between everyday experience and science, fostering what Roth calls “rooting”.

Summary

This paper’s objective was to explore what a pedagogy that affirms epistemic equality axiomatically might look like. In particular, the aim was to examine how we would have to rethink the basis structure of pedagogical relationships, rather than defining and defending specific practices. To that end, the perspectives of Rancière, Roth and Heidegger were brought into conversation.

What emerged are the outlines of a pedagogy oriented towards “poetic dwelling”. Such a pedagogy continuously re-examines how we use language and constantly strives to return our expressions and utterances to the aim of “letting dwell”, i.e., to capture authentically and bring into presence, rather than to categorise, control and standardise. It can be described as the continuous effort to reengage experientially with what surrounds us and to articulate our experience with the world using poetic rather than habitual forms of language – both on the side of the teacher and the student. It is a pedagogy that embodies equality at its core by affirming the value of students’ authentic expression and “dwelling” as «simply worth caring for» (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017, p. 17). The teacher’s action is oriented towards cultivating *and* transforming student’s epistemic positions, rather than replacing them.

It is worth reiterating that this is not an uncritical pedagogy, accepting whatever any individual says and thinks at face value. Much to the contrary, to continuously question long-held beliefs and assumptions, and to engage with subject matter with a willingness to transform previous understanding is essential to the sort of emancipation Rancière and Roth envision. Epistemic equality does not mean a rejection of facts and truths in favour of individual perspective; in the way it has been constructed in this paper, it simply means to underpin pedagogical relationships with the acknowledgement that a) different understandings of the world, formed through experience outside of school, build a meaningful foundation for learning processes in school and that they are worth both of preservation *and* transformation, rather than simply replacement, and b) that everyone has the capacity to develop their understanding of the world in interaction with the world without a superior “knower” emancipating them. Significantly, this does not mean that the pedagogical relationship itself is obsolete or that there are no discrepancies between teacher and student. The teacher remains a crucial and guiding figure in the process, in particular when it comes to how they speak, communicate, interrogate, and listen.

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Education as Resisting the Coming Barbarism: A Post-critical perspective on Education, the School and Teaching in the Face of Social- and Environmental Catastrophe

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Abstract

This article addresses the call for education to engage with contemporary social and environmental challenges, whilst preserving its pedagogical integrity. By focusing on the genuinely educational core of the school and teaching we want to avoid falling in the trap of instrumentalizing education or functionalizing it in order to resolve societal problems, however, we will argue that its precisely these ‘essential characteristics’ of education and the school which might offer a response to the challenges we’re facing nonetheless. We intend to take up the matter of our current global predicament and frame it as an *educational problem*, drawing on several educational attitudes such as giving orientation, enabling agency and fostering a belief in – and responsibility for – the common world. In doing this we will argue for the correspondence between a logic of education and a logic of care for the world. We therefore end with a defense of the institution of the school and a more ‘traditional’ account of teaching against discourses which seek to frame it as outdated or inherently unsustainable, and we propose to emphasize the role it plays in fostering a renewed relation to the world. The purpose of this article, referring the title of a work by Isabelle Stengers, is a resistance to the oversimplification and impoverishment of our thinking (on education) and ways of (educational) life. Our account is therefore *post-critical* in the sense of that we intend to affirm the richness of an autotelic understanding of education, as well as its significance for finding ways to live more responsibly and sustainably.

Keywords: Post-critique; school; climate; Latour; capitalism; politics.

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Introduction

In the face of escalating social and environmental challenges, education is often looked at as a possible means or even the prime agent to ‘fix’ these problems. This article seeks to navigate ways in which we can respond to such call without falling into the trap of instrumentalizing education for ‘political’ means or impose a functionality on it which is not properly educational. What is at stake is giving an account of education and the school which affirms its essential characteristics and procedures and to show how their intensification is conducive to a logic of care and responsibility for the world, which is necessary for a renewed and sustainable relationship to it. In doing this we will articulate several properly *educational attitudes* which *characterize education as such, the school and teaching* respectively in responding to the challenges facing us. These attitudes are: *to give orientation, to enable agency and to take responsibility for a common world.*

These attitudes will be derived as responses to the respective problem formulations of Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway with regards to current social and environmental concerns. These three authors, amongst others, will thus characterize our global predicament as well as lead us to a possible educational response. Although there are other educational frameworks which have responded to much the same issues and authors, for instance those drawing on pragmatism, we propose a different approach, which to our estimation stays closer to the nature of (school) education (for instance, see Schildermans, 2019; Savransky 2022; Ingold, 2017).

The outcome of this article is then to give a *post-critical* and substantial account of education, the school and teaching that seeks to affirm their proper meaning in the face of discourses which seek to discredit the school as fundamentally unsustainable and outdated as well as discourses which seek to instrumentalize the school. We propose to present the problems facing us as *educational problems* and in our affirmation of the efficacy of the school, we do not intent to put it in function of some external agenda. Rather, we are emphasizing the unique character of education and the school in *enabling* the coming generation to relate themselves anew to the world. In the following section we will first outline the problem to which we seek to respond and next we will deal extensively with how the school relates to this.

The bifurcation of nature and GAIA

According to Bruno Latour our current global predicament is a consequence of the irreversible destruction we ourselves have brought to the

world we inhabit through our post-enlightenment endeavors. Resulting from this, according to Latour, there is not enough liveable space left for everyone to live a decent life together, in unity with the non-human actors who also inhabit the earth. It follows that today's main social challenge is how to live well together on a damaged planet. The issues we encounter have reached such a level of complexity that it is no longer possible to have a clear view and understanding of the conditions we inevitably face; which reveals that traditional strategies in the fields of sciences, politics, but also education are no longer adequate to deal with these complex problems.

According to Latour, the whole question of 'how we relate to the world' is already a badly posed problem, one which assumes that Nature and Culture are at once distinct but impossible to separate from each other. Our progressive realization of the gravity of the ecological crisis however provokes calls such as that we 'ought to bring humans closer to nature' which short circuits our scheme that attempts to set nature/culture apart from each other, resulting in a panic attack (Latour, 2018, pp. 14-15). In other words, throughout modernity we have operated with a certain notion of a nature/culture divide, serving as a sort of 'metaphysical presupposition' which allocated certain characteristics to either side. As the inheritors of this modern framework of thinking our relation to nature, we are unable to find adequate orientation in collectively understanding the problems now facing us as the whole set-up is to polemical.

Latour therefore proposes the term '*world*' which is set against the term Nature/Culture, where Nature/Culture as a productive dichotomy is internal to '*world*'. This may at first seem like a bizarre solution to them problem, the specifics of which can't go to much into, but it comes down to seeing *the world* as consisting out of a plurality of forms of existence where the Nature/Culture dichotomy is only one way of structuring these existents (*Idib.*, pp. 36-8). To make this more concrete, and relevant to our agenda, it makes sense to briefly go into the way in which the Moderns have structured their existents and the consequences this has.

According to Latour, the Moderns have bifurcated reality into a subjective and an objective domain and relegated certain characteristics to the beings inhabiting either of the two terms. On the one hand, we have the human subjects with agency and on the other we have liveless matter which is devoid of any agency. Thus, we have *effectively* rendered anything belonging to the so-called 'natural world' as inherently materialistic and therefore lacking of any power to act, ultimately putting an enormous rift between 'the world out there' and 'our capacity to think and act' which disinvests matter from any so-called subjective qualities such as meaning and agency (Latour, 2008, pp. 36-37). To put the emphasis again on *effectively* relegating these

characteristics on these existents, we can understand this in a pragmatist sense. This bifurcation can be seen as an *operation* which has certain *effects* and Latour takes it upon himself to inquire into what the ideas and abstractions of the moderns do to the milieu in which they circulate. How they disqualify certain fundamental dimensions of experience and can devastate other modes of being (Debaise, 2022). By reducing reality to matter and imposing this idea on the way society is organized, we render suspect the various living attachments to territories and the various forms of life. In effect, the moderns have therefore lost the capacity to live on the earth by leaving no room to other existents besides ‘matter’ (Debaise, 2023).

It is because of our continuous impoverishing of ‘nature’ to lifeless matter that we have taken it to be nothing more than an external environment to which we relate. It is disinvested from having any intrinsic meaning or agency (i.e. it is us who create meaning) itself and taken to be nothing but a resource to us, a background to which we act. It is this position which resulted in the subsequent domination of nature as something which could be dominated in the first place, something which is unable to resist human endeavor. This scheme is now finding its limits and is being subverted by the ways in which we are coming to realize the implications of climate change. We have to admit that nature is itself a *force*, that the catastrophes that are happening are only understandable if we relegate a form of agency, a power to act to natural phenomena, making them into *actors* (Latour, 2017, pp. 68-70).

Isabelle Stengers, a philosopher of science very close to Latour, has called our current predicament the ‘intrusion of GAIA’. The figure of GAIA is taken from James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, naming the dense assemblage of relations such as living beings, oceans, soil, climate, etc... GAIA, moreover, is its own regime of activity and sensitivity, the multiple entangled constitutive processes which are part of it have repercussions and affects on each other and hold things together (Stengers, 2015, pp. 43-5). Stengers proposes to see GAIA as a ‘forgotten form of transcendence’, an assemblage of forces which are indifferent to us, what it’s intrusion then means is that these forces now demand our attention. Our ways of engaging with the world from modernity on have reached a point where our social system can no longer immunize itself to the effects the natural world has on us. GAIA intrudes because the ‘stability’ we have imposed on our own social assemblages rested on keeping it out, an operation that in light of our discussion of Latour is untenable. But, more significantly, the prime agent pushing forward this relation and which now also immunizes us to respond appropriately is *capitalism*.

Capitalism is a 'mode of functioning' or 'a machine' which knows only it's own necessities and actors, constantly deterritorializing, capturing and redefining more and more dimensions of what makes up our reality. With regards to the intrusion of GAIA, it cannot do anything but identify it as a new field of opportunity (pp. 53-4). In a sense we could say that the capitalist system works autopoietically, it might translate what it receives from its environment into its own system, but does this only with the interest of its own reproduction in mind. According to Stengers, we have given our agency to act out of hands to globalized capitalism which mobilizes both nation states and individual behavior in inherently unsustainable directions. The processes of capitalism have colonized the ways in which we organized society and have aimed at capturing the 'capacities of thinking and resisting' and of giving direction to ourselves (Idib., p.55).

What we must do to respond to GAIA goes against and beyond what capitalism as a mechanism for coordination can do for us, yet it still works to subvert any attempts to properly recognize our current situation and construe more sustainable modes of living. What Stengers thus seems to say is that we have *lost agency ourselves*. According to Donna Haraway, neoliberalism with its emphasis on the independence of individuals to their environment incapacitates us to come to terms with what she calls a 'sympoetic way of living'. Sympoiesis (as opposed to autopoiesis) consists in becoming-with, being coordinated by the ability to respond (so called *response-ability*) to the changes in our constitutive environments. Following Hannah Arendt analysis of the Eichmann trial, she says that we have 'lost the ability to think'. We have become unable to make the world present to ourselves and have surrendered to an immaterial, inconsequential and self-centered idea of the world in which we are unable to recognize the effects of our involvement in it, both in terms of its consequences for us as well as the consequences we have on it (Haraway, 2016, p.36).

Before dealing with the question of what any of this has to do with education, we refer once more to Bruno Latour from whom we will develop three educational attitudes which can make explicit how we can take the former problem-formulations as educational challenges. According to Latour the political impasse of being able to deal with the issues facing us has to do with the ways we have lost the ability to live in the same world and the ways in which the political field is dichotomized between on the one hand the so-called progressive, modernizing and globalizing position and, on the other, the conservative, backward and local position (Latour, 2018, p.20). Such a dichotomization creates a false problem in which we cannot develop the adequate politics in order to re-orient ourselves. We therefore have to direct ourselves to a *terrestrial* point of reference in which we create the conditions

of thriving with other inhabitants (also the extra-human) in a sustainable way of living (*Idib.*, p.89).

It is from this that we want to articulate a first more explicit attitude which we will argue is inherently educational, namely that of *finding orientation*. What Latour calls for is looking for the possibilities of making the world present to us as something we are embedded in, something which we are involved in together with others with whom we share it. Finding orientation is then about *becoming aware* of the world in which we act (and which is the result of our acting). Intimately linked to this is also the *belief in a common world*, a second attitude. Referring to Haraway's analysis, we need to be able to make the world present to us as something which does not exist only for us and merely as a background for our individual acting. We have to make the world appear as something to which we all belong. A third attitude deals with the analysis of Stengers, namely that of enabling agency. This is a point which we will develop further, but for now it suffices to say that it is about securing the possibilities for us to become attached to the world in a way that empowers us to recognize our capacity *to build* a different future.

In the following we will argue how these three attitudes can be understood as the educational responses to the respective problem formulations. We will affirm a certain autotelic idea of education, the 'institution' or arrangement of the school and the practice of teaching as moments in which students can become subjects in relation to a world which is made meaningful to them. The core of the argument then consists in showing how education is fundamentally bound up with a logic of care and responsibility and that the specific effects of school education allow for students to find necessary orientation and agency in the world. What will become clear is that we do not, as opposed to other educational frameworks inspired by pragmatism, propose for the school to become the place where new ways of inhabiting the world can be formed. Rather, by pointing to education as the place in which the world can be made sensible as a collective enterprise to which we have a responsibility we mean to emphasize the role it plays in securing the possibilities of having an understanding of – orientation in – and agency in – the common world. Our discussion of education, the school and teaching therefore leads us to envisioning it in a sense of world-disclosure, enabling a capable subject to arise.

A post-critical response

The response that we will now outline and which is the main argument of this article is one grounded in a post-critical affirmation of school education.

Post-critique protests against a prevailing critical perspective in pedagogy which is wound up in ‘inherent critique of societal institutions focused of their dysfunctionality’. Rather, post-critique proposes a pedagogical approach which tries to ask again what education, upbringing, school, studying, ... essentially are, creating a space that enables these practices to happen anew and to defend these educational activities as having a value in themselves (Hodgson et al., 2017, p.17). Furthermore, what we will try to do with this view is that we don’t take the challenges facing us as reasons to subvert education, but as invitation to investigate what educational phenomena can mean in relation to these issues. It is looking at what we are essentially doing as educators and valuing it as autotelic activities as well as from a hermeneutical operation trying to look at how these activities can have meaning beyond a uniquely educational scope. Post-critique thus looks at the inherently pedagogical dimensions of educational life (such as cultivating the capacity to be attentive and concentrate) and puts them against a broader background of normative societal issues (such as the fragmenting of our attention span through digital media). In this way a post-critical perspective can deal with social issues in a decisively pedagogical manner. Anticipating on what will be developed in the next section, we will thus argue for the meaning that such practices have with regards to care and responsibility for a damaged planet in correspondence with their primary educational sense.

Education as such, a matter of orientation in the world

To start constructing our substantial account of education, we refer to Hannah Arendt’s definition of the essence of education outlined in her seminal text *The crisis in education* (Arendt, 1993). Arendt sees education as an existential process connected to the nature of the human condition that each generation must grow in the old world and prepare a new generation for a new world. Education for Arendt is essentially about the fact that the new generation ought to be introduced in the existing world, not solely in order for them to reproduce it, but also for them to introduce newness to it, to inherit the world and do something with it. One of the basic characteristics of existence is thus that with each generation newness is created as the rejuvenation of the old, inherited world.

This characterization has some important consequences for the meaning of educating and the relationship between education and politics. Education in this sense is *not* about simply imparting knowledge onto students, but is has a much more existential meaning in that it prepares them to partake in the world in which they are born. Students ought to be *formed*, shown *what is at stake* and what *matters*, they need the world to be disclosed to them in

all of its meaning in order for them to eventually take up a position in relation towards it. The crisis of education is precisely the fact that in her time (and we could argue that the same situation subsists) this task of education was abandoned in favor for a ‘child-centered’ approach. This implies that education no longer *dared* to present the new generation with the matters which mattered in the world, that it no longer sought to form the next generation in light of what we value as society and to bring them up to relate themselves to the world. Rather, the tendency was (and is) so that we focus solely on the needs the child. We would argue that to truly empower a child and the next generation, we ought not to reduce the task of educating to just ‘enabling the natural development process’, which is inherently individualizing, but it is precisely *initiating* them into the world of meaning and giving them the opportunity to bring newness to it (Vlieghe, 2024)

Education, in nature, is thus *world-centered* to put it in Gert Biesta’s terms. The world is where our existence takes place, where we become subjects and education is therefore about us pointing out *something* to *someone*. Education is then about turning students to the world enabling them to encounter the world to attend to it (Biesta, 2022)¹. Already we might see how such an emphasis on the world, the importance that there is only one world (and not an infinity of individual worlds in the minds of unique children), the coupling of the fate of the continuation of the world and education, and that education is given meaning by the fact that a new future is possible, is fruitful to think the relationship between education and sustainability. In activating the world through study materials through which students can become attached to the world we can allow them to see what is happening today and relate to it. Also, in Latour’s terms, for matters of fact about the world to make sense, we first need a background of a shared world to make them meaningful, which is where Arendt intends to go. In his words again, education then plays an enabling role in making ‘matters of concern’ appear (Swillens & Vlieghe, 2020).

¹ It is worth noting that both Latour’s call for a re-orientation towards the terrestrial and Biesta’s call for a re-orientation to the world both attempt to transcend stupefying distinctions between what is ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’. For Latour the distinction between progressive and conservative was mapped onto the tendency towards globalization on the one hand, and an emphasis on territory on the other. This has led to the false problem in which any reference to the ‘local’ is automatically considered as backward and conservative. The reorientation to the ‘terrestrial’ is an attempt to overcome this dichotomy and affirm the significance and value of situated practices and meanings in understanding the ecological predicament we are in and responding adequately. For Biesta the opposition between student-centered and curriculum-centered approaches has similarly been framed in such a progressive-conservative distinction. World-centeredness offers a third way beyond and in between this false dichotomy.

The school, a matter of agency and belief in the common world

This logic is further developed and intensified in the account that Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons give of the school. Rather than following the often heard critique pertaining to the school as alienating students from the world and imparting outdated knowledge about it, they argue that the school allows for the world to be disclosed in the first place (Masschelein & Simons, 2012, p.30). School to them refers back to its ancient Greek root *Scholè*, meaning free time. Free time is the time which is free from social obligations, free from one's respective place in social structure, free from family, from economy, it is the time which does not have a destiny. It is the time which does not ask of us to be productive, it is a *suspended* time. (Masschelein, 2011). The aim the school then serves is to give equal opportunity for everyone to be brought into relation to the world as an end in itself. School is then the aesthetic arrangement which makes the concrete and material event of *Scholè* happen, when students are put in relation to something in the world (Masschelein, 2011).

Connecting school in its more material sense to a world-centered perspective, we can then take the school as the place, the concrete arrangement, in which an educator can bring the world inside a classroom. Where a certain *representation* of the world is presented and the students are made attentive to it and are disciplined through this attention to the object. The various pedagogical forms talked about then serve the purpose of enabling the world to appear in a distinct way which gestures its importance. The school in this sense becomes the arrangement *par excellence* which harbors a certain attentive and caring relationship to the world in that it is the only place in which the world is dealt with as such, where it is dealt with as something with value in itself.

Their 'defence of the school' is relevant to us in light of our previous problem formulation for a few reasons. On the one hand it echoes Arendt's earlier definition of the essence of education, but even more than that, Masschelein and Simons also point towards the specific *efficacy* of the school in materializing this essence. Given the fact that our societies have reached a complexity in which it can no longer be expected that the next generation is quasi-spontaneously exposed to what is meaningful in the world and enabled to be *formed* by it, we have to rely on structured *representations* of the world (Mollenhauer, 2014, pp. 53). The school then becomes a necessary technology through which adequate introduction to the world and their formation as individuals takes place. The productivity of the school then lies precisely in *not* just reproducing and extending the individual lifeworld of students, but to bracket it in order to activate a sense of formation

which consists in transcending their unique lifeworld in which they become ‘part’ of the world (Masschelein & Simons, 2012, pp. 32-33).

We can connect this not only to a belief in a common world or with finding orientation in it, but also to the matter of agency. As Ramsey McGlazer claims in his book *Old schools* (2023), the traditional schooling apparatus, rather than being an instrument of reproduction of hegemonic discourse or the production of docile bodies, is what enables students to take a *distance* from the way in which contemporary society (i.e. neoliberal capitalism) determines them (p. 11). It would be an illusion to think that, if we’re to just leave children to their own lifeworlds and to reduce school to just affirming these individual lifeworlds, those children would grow up to be self-determining individuals. In a way Kant, although not entirely unproblematically, already saw this. The aim of education for him is precisely to free the individual from themselves through discipline. Gert Biesta renders this idea in a more contemporary form by referring to the ‘task’ of education which in his understanding is the opening the possibilities for students to explore what it means to exist as *subjects*. Education should make the grown-up existence of another human being *in the world* possible. We can approach this ‘grown-upness’ in a twofold manner, both according to what we’ve been discussing. On one hand, it has to do with students acknowledging that they are not the center of the world, but to consider their existence as being *in the world*. Secondly grown-upness is about the ways in which ‘our desires receive a reality check’. It is through the introduction to the world and having to take accountability that we also learn to ‘interrupt’ our spontaneous desiring and resist our impulses (Biesta, 2017).

Whilst for Kant the individual had to be freed from themselves, this call for agency through education and in connection to the discussion of Stengers, has another, more contemporary relevance. Bernard Stiegler (2008) for example brings to awareness how technologies and the modern media industry captures the attention of the young generation (and the old) and in this way transfigures the usual processes of intergenerational transmission and formation. With the advent of social media and their algorithmization, the construction of highly individuated echo-chambers this call becomes even more pressing. There is a clear rise of technologically mediated operations which potentially result in the further individualization of the young generation in which they are continually put out of reach of more deliberate and normative representation of what our common world consists of and in which they are increasingly *affected* by social media discourses, regulated only by financial motivations. We thus might be dealing with a further intensification of what Gert Biesta, following Paul Robert, pointed out with

regards to going from an impulse economy to an impulse *society* in which our desires are continuously told to multiply (Biesta, 2022, p.100).

The call for agency is thus twofold in this case. On the one hand, we are losing the agency as a society to bring the young into a common world, an agency which is moreover being increasingly degraded through the neoliberalization of education. This trend reduces school to a instrument to introduce students only to higher education or the labour-market instead of being guided by more substantial educational values (Masschelein & Simons, 2006) And on the other hand, we are losing the capacity to enable the next generation to be formed in a sphere which is separated from capitalist logics. This latter risk is then connected to the agency of the future generation which will have to find ways to come together under the *belief in a common world* which is worth fighting for and which transcends the necessities of capitalism.

Teaching, a matter of responsibility for the world

Going from education in general, through the arrangement of the school, towards the *act of teaching*, we can identify a third genuinely educational sense to respond to our problem. The teacher is the person who in the act of teaching enables education to take place. The teacher brings together the world, in the form of *subject-matter*, and the next generation, actively forming the students in relation to this world. Teaching is predicated on a love for a subject matter, which grants to possibility of a genuine educational encounter. It is because of the dedication that a teacher has for a subject, which drives its expression in the presence of students that it becomes possible for a new generation to become attentive to and interested in something, giving them the chance to begin anew with it. Teaching is an *event* in which the moment in which a teacher falls in love with a subject matter and is transformed by it, is re-affirmed. It consists in the teacher performing their dedication to the matter and to bring it into presence to the students in a way to make this falling in love into a ‘communal experience’ (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019). When one teaches it moreover requires a sort of *erotic dynamic* in which you, as a teacher, want to draw a student into desiring something they did not before. As a teacher we want to make our love for something we find important resonate with others, for a sake in itself, but also for the sake of its protection (Vlieghe, 2024)

Education, moreover, is also bound up with responsibility, a responsibility grounded in the bond we as humans have with the world. Teaching affirms that there is good in the world and the present (it is thus, *post-critical*) and recognizes our power for responsible action in the sake of

a matter. What we can call ‘the logic of responsibility’ is the relation to the world that consist of attentiveness as well as care to what we deem intrinsically good in the world. The task and challenge of the teacher is then to *show* what is worth and in need of our attention and to which everyone in the room has the freedom to act (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019).

To draw on Latour again we can also see teaching in light of his notion of ‘matters of concern’. Teaching as an expressive act is about the way in which the teacher in the act of teaching discloses the subject matter and the attitude they do this through. What we argue is that in teaching a subject can be disclosed in such a way that it is not presented as something isolated, but as something truly *worldly*. That through being taught, students are confronted with things *of the world* and that through subtle gestures by a teacher it might become visible to students that what they are being taught is implied in a whole world of meaning which has determinate *effects* in the world. We propose to see teaching *in its nature* as a practice of world disclosure through the act of teaching specific subjects in which the interrelations between things can be made virtually present. As if in the dealing with each subject, the entire curriculum would be present.

Teaching in such a fashion intends to make clear that what is being taught and what the students are being introduced to is a common world, it is through the act of teaching that a teacher then might be able to *confer* on the students a *belief in a common world*. Moreover, it is by presenting the things in their relation to other things that they become *matter of concern* to the students, matter through which student might find *orientation* in the world. In a sense it reveals the relevance and importance of these subjects, it reveals their involvement with and impact on other things and thus the way in which they structure the world in which we partake. Moreover, students might be invited in this way to relate further to the subject. By making visible the object in the way in which it is present in other things students can become *sensitive* towards it. The common world doesn’t appear as some image we present to students, either as a totality or fragmented, but as something which has a *correlate in experience itself*.

Making things into matters of concern is also a way of activating the classroom as an instance in which we not only come together around something in common, but also a very strong experience of community as such. We become involved in the way that the common world is something we *actively* play a role in, in which we have (political) agency. We might see this in light of the notion of ‘pedagogical subjectivation’ as it appears in Simons and Masschelein. It being the ‘living through a strong experience of potentiality’ and experiencing that ‘I am able’, to experience the agency we have as creatures of ability precisely through the way in which school

disrupts the distribution of positions in the social order (and in the family) through the confrontation with study material in the face of which all are equal (Simons & Masschelein, 2010). What we mean to say is that through the educational encounter of being introduced to the world and enabled to relate to it collectively a form of agency is made possible. We are not yet in a political domain then, but we are dealing with a form of subjectivation which makes us politically capable in relation to the common world.

Conclusion: the educational question to ask

To conclude we want to return to Arendt's essence of education and discuss the two 'moments' which we think it consists of. One the one hand we have to introduction of the new generation into the world, something which is actualized in the act of education (through school and through teaching), and on the other hand we have the rejuvenation the next generation brings to this world through their own relating to it. In a sense what many educationalists dealing with the same issues as ours seem to want to do is actualize this second moment, to already involve students in the formation of new 'habits' and form a new relation to the world (Ingold 2017). Legitimate as it might be, the perspective we wanted to represent here limits itself more to the actualizing the first moment in a way which prepares for the second moment to truly take place. It is through a proper introduction to the world in a way in which students can *orient* themselves in it, in a way in which they *believe* there to be a common world and in a way in which they are enabled to relate themselves to it in unforeseen ways. We want to propose that the question we then ask in light of the problems facing us is not "what ought we to do in order to live better", but rather: 'what ought we to do to allow the next generation to live better'.

With this we do not mean to say that we should just leave it to the next generation to figure things out, but we want to direct our attention to the allowing for the conditions in which the next generation can be brought up in order to have a power to act themselves. Of course we also believe that students should be exposed more to other ways of relating to the world and engage with practices that can anticipate on a more sustainable way of living, but according to us this is not a component strictly proper to education. Affirming the *unique* role of education in light of our current predicaments consists of activating *worldly* proper sense and to see in what *worldly* efficacy consists of. What this perspective then could mean is a reformulated call for a 'defense of the school', both for *worldly* own sake and for the sake of the way in which it allows us to live better. This *post-critical* perspective means

that we recognize the ‘power’ of certain educational practices to make the world present and to form students in relation to it. What such a perspective can offer us with regards to broader themes such as climate change or social injustice (themes which are normally subsumed under critical pedagogy) is that this educational power can be mobilized in face of these issues. We see that educational practices which we thought to be outdated in fact carry meaning in them which corresponds to what is necessary to measure up to our challenges.

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The Promise of Social Justice through Digitalization in Education

by Pia Rojahn*

Abstract

Different global institutions like the UN and the UNESCO make claims on a positive potential that the digitalization could have in achieving more social justice, particularly through education. This belief in the positive effects of digitalization in education will be challenged in this paper by addressing three concerns that are particularly connected with the experience of collectivity:

- 1) Social media is confused with a public space.
- 2) The isolating experience in using digital tools stands in contrast to the collectiveness of educational settings.
- 3) Educational responsibility is lost when digital tools are in charge of education.

These concerns will be discussed with reference to Hannah Arendt's differentiation of disparate life spheres (the private, the political and the social), her analysis of the experience of being alone (solitude, isolation and loneliness) and her critique concerning the devaluation of the teacher's profession. Finally, the analysis will be connected to a post-critical perspective in education that emphasizes the experience of collectivity in educational settings.

Keywords: Digitalization; Hannah Arendt; isolation; collectivity; educational responsibility; post-critical pedagogy.

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Introduction

The digitalization of educational settings is often associated with the idea that it could enable a positive change in social justice.¹ There is the hope that through digital tools and spaces more people could participate in (online) discussions. Obviously, the participation in the digital world is only possible for the ones that possess reliable tools to enter it. In this paper, I do not want to focus on this materialistic perspective even though it would be also important. I rather want to address – with the help of Hannah Arendt's ideas – three other concerns in relation to the promise of social justice through digitalization in education that are particularly connected with the experience of collectivity:

- (1) Social media is confused with a public space.
- (2) The isolating experience in using digital tools stands in contrast to the collectiveness of educational settings.
- (3) Educational responsibility is lost when digital tools are in charge of education.

These three concerns are raising doubts about different areas of education. The first concern addresses the context of education and its influence on educational institutions like the school. The second concern deals with questions of educational theory and how educational processes change when digital tools are used. The last doubt concentrates on the role of the teacher and their responsibility in digital settings. In the conclusion all these concerns are brought together with a post-critical perspective in education as it puts an emphasis on the collectivity of educational experiences. Because only through collective experiences in which one becomes familiar with the plurality of the world, it becomes understandable why discussions around concepts like social justice might be important.

¹ Some examples can be found among global organisation like the UN (2006 and 2023) and the UNESCO (technology plays an important part in their agenda for Education2030) but particularly religious charity groups and associations focus on the promise of social justice through technology and digitalization, e.g. the *World Association for Christian Communication* (WACC) published the manifesto «Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age» in 2021. Another example is the platform «Knowledge for Development without Borders. Digitalisation for Development», which labels itself as a «digitalization platform for Social Justice» (KFDWB in Dec 2023). Of course, education is mentioned as a key in all these concepts that want to achieve social justice with the help of digitalisation and technology. To just give one example: «Despite these multiple crises, there are many opportunities to build a coalition for social justice and to unleash greater investments in decent jobs, with a particular focus on the green, digital and care economy, and on young people».

Social Media: Private, Social or Public?

In her *Reflections on Little Rock* Arendt commented on the beginning of the desegregation in the USA, particularly in schools. Even though her arguments on the importance of different rights (e.g. the right to choose who you marry vs. the right to choose your children's school) were proven wrong (cf. Berkowitz, 2020, pp. 73-80), her differentiation of spheres can still be a helpful analytic tool to examine social media and its dynamics. Arendt differentiates three spheres between which people constantly move: the private, the social and the public sphere. All three spheres are ruled by different principles. The private realm is ruled by the principle of exclusiveness: «Here we choose those with whom we wish to spend our lives, personal friends and those we love; and our choice is guided not by likeness or qualities shared by a group of people – it is not guided, indeed, by any objective standards or rules» (Arendt, 1959, p. 52).

In contrast to that the public realm is ruled by the principle of equality. The public sphere is the place of the body politic and the space of legislature. Therefore, discrimination and prejudices cannot play a part in this sphere. Between the private and the public realm lies the social sphere (or Arendt also just likes to call it “the society”) that she characterizes as follows:

What equality is to the body politic – its innermost principle – discrimination is to society. Society is that curious, somewhat hybrid realm between the political and the private in which, since the beginning of the modern age, most men have spent the greater part of their lives. For each time we leave the protective four walls of our private homes and cross over the threshold into the public world, we enter first, not the political realm of equality, but the social sphere (*Ibid.*, p. 51).

She continues to underline that what matters in the social sphere «is not personal distinction but the differences by which people belong to certain groups whose very identifiability demands that they discriminate against other groups in the same domain» (*Ibidem*). To summarize Arendt's description of the social sphere: it is a space where the belonging to a certain group stands in the foreground and where the distinction from other groups is most important. In addition to that, the social sphere is a hybrid realm that sometimes seems to overlap with the private or the public.

If we think about social media platforms such as Facebook (or Instagram, which is now part of Facebook or rather the Meta company), the hybrid character of social media becomes very visible: those platforms have the possibility to chat in private (in their messengers), they offer a choice when you make a post (if you want to show it to everyone or just your “friends”)

or you can choose to publish a fully “public” post that is visible to everyone using the platform (or even for non-users that can find your post via search engines like Google). However, there are many ways of using these platforms that are not public. At the same time, conversations that were private can be made public through them – if you make a screenshot of a private conversation and then publish the photo publicly. The hybridity of those platforms is obvious but still, they are often confused with public spaces, in which everyone can easily participate. The problem with this confusion is that discussions around topics (like social justice, for example) that take place on those platforms are mistaken for public debates even though they are often quite exclusive and limited – and many times the sources and contexts of certain claims are not transparent.²

Arendt’s differentiation, particularly, between the social and the public realm is helpful to emphasize that the underlying principles matter here: if social media is understood as a public space even though its underlying principles are discrimination and distinction, those principles are “made” public or claimed to be public. Social media enables many people to make statements on public issues but that does not mean that these statements have a general perspective or follow the principle of equality that is essential to the public realm. Arendt’s critique of the society springs from the fear that individual interests could replace the general. This concern is even more reasonable in reference to social media platforms where individual interests are constantly mistaken for general statements.

Isolation versus Collectivity

When we enter the digital space, we are usually alone, sitting in our separate rooms, our (home) offices or even when we are surrounded by people, we block them out (often with the help of headphones). Entering the digital space asks for a certain kind of separation from others, however, this separation can be of different quality. Arendt offers a threefold division of the experience of being alone: she separates solitude from isolation and loneliness (cf. Arendt, 2017, pp. 623-628). Solitude is the creative withdrawal from others. When I am in solitude, I am only physically alone but, in my mind, I am still surrounded by others, dialoguing with them, and imagining their perspectives on the topic I am dealing with. In contrast to

² The same could be noted for tools like ChatGPT, which seems to be a source of endless knowledge, even though many flaws have been detected to its answers already (cf. Rojahn, 2024). Further remarks on the role of ChatGPT in education will follow in part three on “Educational Responsibility”.

that isolation concerns the political space. When I am isolated, I have no possibility to act together with others (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 623). I am stripped of my political powers: «isolated men are powerless by definition» (*Ibid.*). In relation to the above-mentioned principle of equality in the political sphere, isolated humans are not considered to be equal and thus, they are not allowed to participate in political discussions. This is how Arendt tries to grasp the marginalization of certain groups. However, isolated people still have the private sphere as their refuge: in their homes, they still can connect with others and experience belongingness.

The worst experience of “being alone” is loneliness because it «concerns human life as a whole» (*Ibid.*: 624). In loneliness Arendt sees one of the reasons why totalitarianism in 1930s-Germany could succeed. Loneliness means to be separated in the political as well as in the private sphere. Arendt emphasizes: «Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others» (*Ibid.*, p. 625). She makes clear that loneliness is the loss of common sense, which is one of our most important connections with other people that relates us to the world:

Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our common sense which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous. Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience (*Ibid.*, p. 625).

Arendt underlines that we need other people to make sense of our individual experiences. The interaction with others keeps us from being trapped in our own particularity. Again, Arendt fears that the particular will be separated from the general.

The mediation between the particular and the general is the focus of every educational theory (in the sense of theory of *Bildung*): if either the particular is overemphasized or the general is overwhelming, there is no process of *Bildung*. To come back to the different experiences of being alone: solitude still enables processes of *Bildung*, while isolation harshly limits the spaces in which *Bildung* is possible. Finally, loneliness is a state in which every possibility of educational processes seems to be lost.

Arendt’s differentiation comes from her analysis of totalitarianism and I do not want to hastily transfer it to education in the context of the digital space. However, I want to argue that her differentiation of solitude, isolation and loneliness can be helpful to illustrate some of the dangers we need to be aware of when we are being very hopeful about digital spaces and

possibilities for education within them (and about creating more social justice in that context). The digital space provides many opportunities to feel connected with others, but it also offers endless possibilities to feel lonely, excluded and cut off. And when we enter the digital space, we usually withdraw ourselves from the analogue world. Sitting in front of a screen (no matter which size) is usually a very isolating activity that separates us from the people around us.

There seems to be some similarity to Arendt's concept of isolation here: isolation means that we are excluded from the political (which for Arendt is the public) space but can still connect with people in the private realm. To enter the digital space, we are usually withdrawing ourselves from the public sphere, at least in a physical sense. When we do enter a "public" discussion in the digital space, it is very different from a public discussion in an analogue setting. Online we are usually not able to see the whole of our audience, to notice if they are reacting bodily or acoustically. Even if a public discussion takes place in a video tool like Zoom, there are some limits to the visibility and perceptibility. So, even when we are entering a public discussion in a digital space, the setting can make us feel alone or at least, very separated from others. This stands in harsh contrast to analogue discussions that usually go hand in hand with a sense of collectivity.

So, what I want to underline here is that being in a digital space comes along with an experience of separation and isolation (in German, I would use the term "Vereinzellung"). Because of that I am very cautious about the hope that the digital space could facilitate, encourage or strengthen discussions around "social justice" easily. Digital spaces do not automatically invite people to have collective experiences; quite the contrary: it takes a lot of effort to create some sense of collectivity and belongingness in the digital space at all.³ However, a sense of collectivity seems to be necessary to understand why we need a concept like social justice. Only if we interact with others, notice our similarities but also the differences in our living conditions, can we understand why we need to bother ourselves with concepts like social justice.

Now some might argue that the digital space provides many examples of photos, videos and narrations that also make us aware that social justice needs to be discussed. And that is, of course, true, but you can decide whenever you want to watch them, turn them off or if you want to avoid them. In analogue public spaces you cannot escape from the presence of others that easily. Public spaces, particularly schools and universities,

³ As most of us noticed during the pandemic, when we had to quickly turn our seminars into online courses.

confront us with other people – without giving us a choice if we want to spend our time with them or not. There we have to learn how to «bear with strangers» (as Morten Kørsgaard (2019) puts it with reference to Arendt).⁴ This experience of collectivity – of interacting with others that are very different to oneself – is essential to educational spaces.

Educational Responsibility⁵

Isolating experiences are also very present in schools since new forms of pedagogical diagnostics became popular. Those diagnostics promise that with the help of certain standardized tests, every student's merit can be measured, and an individual learning profile can be developed. The hope is that students can study more efficiently with the help of individualized learning plans. Those plans could also be used to learn with the help of artificial intelligences. The language learning model ChatGPT is one of the artificial intelligences that is ascribed to have high pedagogical potential (cf. Rojahn, 2024) because it can answer numerous questions in a dialogical form. It is sometimes considered to be an effective “substitute teacher” that can support students in their individualized learning.⁶ ChatGPT appears to be a medium that can help with the democratisation of knowledge: everyone can access knowledge and adapt it to their needs.

ChatGPT will answer every question that one might ask without any doubt. To most of the questions, it answers with a list⁷ – always trying to give a short and condensed overview. You can ask for adaption in style or some more details about one point of the list. But your first impression of many topics – if you use ChatGPT to become familiar with them – will be a

⁴ Moreover, Masschelein and Simons (2013) make clear that schools are special places in which students experience collectivity and belongingness: «Here we want to call out an often-neglected aspect of the school: typical for the scholastic is that it involves more than one student. Individual education, or focusing exclusively on so-called individual learning pathways, is not a form of scholastic education. [...] The reason for this is simple but profound: it is only by addressing the group that the teacher is forced, as it were, to be attentive to everyone and no one in particular. The teacher talks to a group of students and, in doing so, speaks to each one individually; she speaks to no one in particular and thus to everyone» (p. 73).

⁵ Some parts of the argumentation in this section might overlap with my paper «Nativity at Risk? Raising Doubts on the Educational Importance of ChatGPT» (2024).

⁶ Two recent examples would be: Kasneci et al., 2023 and Ausat et al., 2023.

⁷ I asked ChatGPT the following questions and it always answered with a list: A) What is social justice? B) Can digitalization help with social justice? C) Are there different theories on social justice? D) Can you, ChatGPT, help with social justice? The answers to question B and D did overlap in many points.

summarized list. An overview like that usually stands at the end of a searching process, in which one collects different concepts and ideas to then dive deeper into the theme. When you use ChatGPT to learn about something new, it throws you into the middle of a possible learning process, where you already find a ready-made list that then guides your further search. However, ChatGPT already made some choices for you. You can try to ask it how it generated the list but that will not give you an insight into how ChatGPT combines and weighs different sources. For example, when I asked ChatGPT how it came up with its list to the question “Can you, ChatGPT, help with social justice?”, its answer was “This understanding comes from a wide range of sources, including academic literature, historical texts, and contemporary discussions on the topic.” ChatGPT does not give exact sources and does not make transparent which importance it gives to which kind of sources, thus it can also lead to false information.⁸ It does not take over responsibility for any information that it hands out.

Hannah Arendt gives a critical characterization of a “progressive” teacher in her essay *The Crisis in Education* (1961): «A teacher, so it was thought, is a man who can simply teach anything; his training is in teaching, not in the mastery of any particular subject» (*Ibid.*, 1958, p. 182). She criticizes that this idea of a teacher ignores the authority that springs from deeper knowledge: «This in turn means not only that the students are actually left to their own resources but that the most legitimate source of the teacher’s authority as the person who [...] still knows more and can do more than oneself is no longer effective» (*Ibid.*). Apart from the knowledge, the most important characteristic of a teacher is that s/he takes over responsibility for the world (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 186) and thus, does not leave the children alone with getting to know the world. Arendt underlines that the teacher always has to mediate between the child and the world as s/he is responsible for both: the well-being of the child while entering the world and the preservation of the world’s knowledge (cf. *Ibidem*). S/he is, particularly, in charge of making the context of the knowledge s/he is teaching transparent and to show the plurality of different standpoints on a topic. This task is crucial because it is a preparation for learning how to form judgements (cf. Arendt, 1992).

ChatGPT can be understood as a “progressive” teacher that has found the one ultimate method because it (or its algorithm) supposedly can find answers to any question. It is like an omniscient teacher that you can ask whatever question you can think of. However, «students are actually left to their own resources» (cf. Arendt, 1961, p. 182) in finding the right questions

⁸ When you open ChatGPT, it usually warns you that it might give you false information and it tells you that it was not created to handout advise.

to ask and trying to understand what sources stand behind the answers. Even though ChatGPT was trained on the basis of an enormous database, it does not make transparent how it structures this data pool and then generates an answer out of it. It might value all the sources evenly, it might look for the amount of repetitions of an information or it might take scientific standards into account. The problem is that ChatGPT does not reveal its selection criteria and when students use it for their individual learning plan, they might be overwhelmed and misled by flawed information.⁹

Conclusion

To come to an end, I would like to recapitulate and connect the first two sections of this paper. The part on social media can be understood as the outside-of-school-context that students and teachers have to deal with constantly when entering digital spaces. So, without any special (educational) intention teachers and students use social media and it is usually their first idea of how digital spaces work – what can be uttered and how people interact in digital spaces. Thus, their first experience with the digital space is one that is social – from an Arendtian perspective it is therefore ruled by distinction and discrimination. This means it is a space, in which the display of difference, the performance of separation, stands in the foreground.

This experience of distinction matches well with the experience of isolation that was outlined in the second part of this paper. Entering the digital space already entails a certain experience of being alone that narrows possibilities of education. Thus, creating collectivity is the biggest challenge for educational settings in digital spaces (as it is also a challenge for education in analogue settings). Collective experiences are also an important prerequisite for understanding why social justice matters and why it is worth to aim for it.

From a post-critical perspective, I would argue that scholastic experiences usually entail moments of collectivity when we gather around the table to

⁹ Just to be clear: The aim of this paper is not to argue for a ban against ChatGPT in schools. Instead of that, the objective is a realistic assessment of ChatGPT's abilities and its educational potential. One of the biggest concerns that makes this artificial intelligence (A.I.) a very questionable "substitute teacher" is that its responses lack transparency and that it does not take over responsibility for the information that it shares. Rather than making teacher's work easier, it adds another task to their duties: teaching students how to question the answers of any A.I. and how to detect false/fake information. This is not a completely new task for teachers, but the importance of this duty has increased since ChatGPT was introduced.

deal with the thing that was put there by the teacher (cf. Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, pp. 56-60).¹⁰ Conveying this metaphor to the digital space, the problem seems to be that in the digital space we cannot make sure if every student even sees the table and if they can leave their private realm to take a seat at it. Another important experience that the post-critical perspective emphasizes is the experience of equality through the gathering around the table. The shared curiosity and puzzlement concerning the thing on the table creates equality and a sense of belongingness. As Masschelein and Simons (2013) put it: «A community of students is a unique community; it is a community of people who have nothing (yet) in common, but by confronting what is brought to the table, its members can experience what it means to share something and activate their ability to renew the world» (p. 73).

So, before we can even start to think about how education in the digital space could influence social justice, we first have to figure out how to put up a “digital table” and how students can gather around it – even though they might not even have left the private realm, might not be ready to enter a public space and might feel isolated as soon as they take a look at the screen.

In addition to that, the idea of substituting teachers with A.I.s like ChatGPT entirely deletes collectivity from educational settings. Individual learning with ChatGPT does not need any table or any other people to gather around it anymore. The student is left alone completely, accessing information in the form of lists without anyone who raises doubts or helps to understand how the list might have come into being.

However, a post-critical standpoint also tries to outline the promising sides of any content and that is why I will briefly add a more hopeful comment. I think that teachers have already gathered a lot of experience with digital tools and their limits during the pandemic. There were, at least, two important remarks by teachers concerning the “digital table”. Firstly, when the teacher and the group already knew each other well from many analogue study experiences, they were already quite good in setting up a table together and were also able to do it in the digital space. And secondly, many teachers addressed the problem of setting up a digital table, so they turned it into a “thing” for a moment, and asked their students about ideas how to create a collective setting and then they found solutions together. In a similar manner, teachers and students already started to explore ChatGPT and its abilities together. Some teachers let their students use it to find some first impressions

¹⁰ «*A thing brings people together because it divides them.* This means that a thing makes people equal without overcoming or abolishing their diversity. People gathered around a thing are equal in the sense Rancière has conceived of when he speaks of “the democracy of the book”: a thing is put on the table, so that everyone can see it, investigate it, make claims about it, refer to it in order to persuade others, etc.» (p. 57, italics in original).

of a new topic. Others posed some questions about a text that they were beginning to discuss in class and then they examined ChatGPT's answers together. But most importantly, they explored the possibilities and limits of ChatGPT in a collective educational setting.

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Normativity or the Genesis of Values: On Critique/Post-critique and Educational Pragmatism

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Abstract

In this paper, we will explore a possible dialogue between educational pragmatism and post-critical pedagogy (PCP) and we will ‘test’ it in reference to the question of inclusion, which is arguably one of the chief notions in contemporary educational debate. To start with, we will object to the possibly unfortunate adoption of the “normativity” vocabulary within the *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* and we will suggest the need for a shift from the language of norms to that of values, by building on Hans Joas’ distinction between norms and values. While norms have to do with obligation and the limitation of possibilities of action, values are characterized by an ideal and inspirational function. In keeping with Joas’ distinction, we will argue that the notion of normativity may risk being accomplice with the excessive role of normative critique decried by post-critical approaches.

Against this backdrop, we will zoom in on the question of inclusion. We will indicate two possible outlooks: a critical pragmatist view of inclusion, as exemplified in some insights of José Medina, and a post-critical understanding, which we will outline in reference to Joas but also – via him – to the classics of educational pragmatism. We will finally suggest that the relationships between critique and post-critique should be construed in terms of a quasi-Bohrian complementarity and that pragmatism qua a “corridor theory,” as Papini famously put it, can help us to orchestrate this complex regime of relationships.

Keywords: Post-critical pedagogy; values; norms; educational pragmatism.

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Pragmatism and/as a non-affirmative theory of education?

The idea that education must be a major vehicle to promote social justice belongs to the «conventional wisdom» (Cremin, 1961, p. 328)¹ of a large part of the contemporary democratic-progressive discourse and, thus, it is taken for granted as if the question revolved only around the identification of the most adequate strategies in order to achieve this goal.

While the latter is highly desirable in socio-political terms, it is debatable, at a philosophical-educational level, if this attitude genuinely describes the task of education qua education. Enlisting education for the enforcement of social justice is an example of what is called, in the German debate, the “affirmative theory of education,” namely a kind of theorizing that is

based on an instrumental concept of educational practice and view[s] it as an important means for either the transmission or the alteration of given actualities. Not as producers of the respective actuality are the educational interactants viewed, but rather as actual or potential bearers of desirable qualities. [...] *[Affirmative theories] recognize the ‘educational’ aspect, [...], only as the ‘execution’ of non-educational demands on educational practice.* (Benner, 2015, p. 147. Emphasis added)

Affirmative theories of education can take on different guises but in modernity the stress has been laid on social issues. Indeed, the educationalization of social problems has been a fundamental ingredient of the modern educational project (Fendler, 2018; Smeyers & Depaepe, 2008) and one of the reasons for its pivotal importance:

Education is perhaps the greatest institutional success of the modern era. It grew from a modest and marginal position in the eighteenth century to the center of modern societies in the twenty-first, where it consumes an enormous share of the time and treasure of both states and citizens. Key to its institutional success has been its facility at educationalization – its ability to embrace and embody the social reform missions that have been imposed upon it. (Labaree, 2008, pp. 447-448)²

¹ Lawrence Cremin refers this phrase not to social justice but rather to the progressive educational discourse dominant up to the 1950s.

² The success to which Labaree refers is the fact that education has been invoked as the chief resource to tackle social problems. This does not entail that education is successful in performing this task. Indeed, quite the contrary has often been the case. One the foci of Labaree’s (2008) argument is precisely the endeavour to explain the «puzzling paradox» of a permanent faith in education despite its failures as a «mechanism for solving [social] problems» (p. 447).

In contrast with this stance, according to Benner a genuinely educational theory of education should be non-affirmative; this implies

[t]he suspension of any affirmative education, that is, the fundamental renunciation of placing education as a directly affirming or negating instance in the service of non-educational actualities. [...] A non-affirmative theory of education differs from affirmative educational conceptions in that it does not conceptualize pedagogical influences as either intentional or functional interventions. Instead, it problematizes the intentionality of educational action on the basis of the principle of the summoning to self-activity [*Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit*] and it challenges the functionality of societal influences under the idea of their pedagogical transformation. (Benner, 2015, pp. 147 and 148)

On the same wavelength does also post-critical pedagogy (PCP henceforth) move when vindicating the «autotelic» character of education (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 18) and appealing to «education for education's sake» (p. 17). Far from being the expression of social irresponsibility, PCP should be read as a radically non-affirmative (in Benner's acceptance³) theory of education.

However, there is a more specific element within it: deploying a conceptuality drawn from Hannah Arendt (2006) and her distinction of education as a specific domain, not to be conflated with that of politics (or the household, for that matter), PCP imputes to critical pedagogy (whether in Bourdieusian, Foucauldian, neo-Marxist or whatever cloak) the fact of confusing education and politics, thereby instrumentalizing the former, that is, turning it into a tool to realize agendas established by the latter.

In contrast, in the outlook of PCP the respective logics of education and politics should be clearly distinguished: the former is ruled by what Arendt calls “love of the world” and its task is the passing on of what is valuable in the world to the new generation, so that the latter can start anew with the world; politics, instead, is animated, especially in its critical inflection, by the “hatred of the world,” understood as the focalization on what is unjust and disempowering and, thus, needs to be changed in order to promote more advanced social arrangements (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020).

Against this backdrop, in the present article we would like to introduce the pragmatist perspective into this conversation. On the one hand, pragmatism – with the intimate bond that it postulates between democracy

³ We specify “Benner's acceptance” because this same adjective (= affirmative) is chosen by PCP to indicate a stance that affirms the love of the world, in opposition to the “negative” attitude, which connotes, instead, the critical mood. Thus, in this inflection, affirmative education – as distinct from critical (= negative) pedagogy – is what PCP endorses in the name of the principle “education for education's sake.”

and education – could appear as an unlikely candidate as a non-affirmative theory of education. Indeed, even the very titles of the works of Dewey seem to deny this possibility: whether emphasizing the relationship of *School and Society* or understanding education as “a necessity of life” and “a social function” – to mention the titles of the first two chapters of *Democracy and Education* –, educational pragmatism seems to be alien to any “autotelic” view of education. And yet, without intimating any complete overlapping with Benner’s or PCP’s stances, one should not forget the powerful vindication of the autonomy of education in which Dewey’s *The Sources of a Science of Education* culminates:

This matter opens up the field of educational values and objectives. How are they to be determined? From what are they derived? The assumption that gives rise to the procedures just criticized is the belief that social conditions determine educational objectives. This is a fallacy. Education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives. *To go outside the educational function and to borrow objectives from an external source is to surrender the educational cause.* (Dewey, 1984, p. 38. Emphasis added)

We should not too hastily translate the stance emerging in this quotation in terms of PCP’s “autotelism,” without taking into consideration also the specific idea of the means-ends continuum that is pivotal in Dewey’s conceptual device. Despite this caveat, establishing a dialogue with non-affirmative theories of education can lead us to a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of educational pragmatism, without making it merely a major manifestation of the educationalization of social problems.

In the same vein, the exploration of a pragmatist take on post-critique is not too frequent (but see Oliverio, 2019, Oliverio, 2020; Thoilliez, 2019; Wortmann, 2019) and also the proponents of PCP seem not to consider pragmatism as a dialogue partner; and yet, this dialogue could be profitable both in order to release some potentialities in the pragmatist outlook and to enrich the post-critical endeavour.

Our argumentation will unfold in two steps. First, we will contest that the vocabulary of “normativity,” which the founding text of PCP adopts, is adequate for a post-critical attitude and we will argue that normativity is better aligned with a critical stance, whereas post-critique should draw on the vocabulary of values. We will take this distinction (norms $\neq$ values) in the inflection that Joas (2000, pp. 174-186) has given to it, by insightfully reactivating some potentialities of the classic pragmatist conceptuality, and we will indicate how it may be deployed in a dialogue with post-critique. In this wake, secondly, we will illustrate the different domains of pertinence (as we may call them) of critique and post-critique by engaging with an

important contribution to a pragmatist pedagogy of inclusion, José Medina's (2014) idea of a "pedagogy of perplexity and discomfort." In particular, we will suggest that Medina ultimately assumes a critical stance and, accordingly, he deploys what PCP would define as a "hermeneutical pedagogy"; moreover, we will argue that this stance may and perhaps should be complemented with a post-critical attitude and, thus, with what PCP dubs as a «pedagogical hermeneutics» (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 16). We will finally suggest that the regime of relationships between critique and post-critique should be construed in terms of a quasi-Bohrian complementarity in order not to ensnare the critique/post-critique discussion in an unending and unhelpful controversy-game, in particular when the question of the "social relevance" of education is at stake.

Norms and/or values?

The *Manifesto for a Post-critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) is the text that has introduced the theme of post-critique – widely discussed in literary theory and social and political philosophy over the last decade – also into the debates of educational theory and philosophy (see Oliverio & Thoilliez, 2024). We have already hinted at two pivotal ideas of PCP, viz. the vindication of the autotelic character of education and the emphasis on the notion of the love of the world as quintessential to the educational endeavour. It is to note that these ideas are presented as "principles" and, more specifically, the *Manifesto* emphasizes the need for «a shift from **procedural normativity to principled normativity**» (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 15. Bold in the original).

To set the coordinates of our engagement with PCP via a pragmatist lens, we will take our cue precisely from the choice of the authors of the *Manifesto* to marshal the vocabulary of "normativity" and, in contrast, we would like to suggest the hypothesis that one of the fault lines between a critical and a post-critical stance lies precisely in the stress upon the (change of) the norms (critique) or rather in a stress on values (post-critique). To flesh out this interpretive hypothesis we will draw on some tenets of Hans Joas (2000), who has provided the most detailed account of a pragmatist theory of values and of the difference between the dimension of values and that of norms.

Joas' definition of values is twofold. First, he defines values as the outcome of the articulation of experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence. By affirming the tight connection between values and experiences, Joas does not mean claiming that values flow directly and immediately from these experiences. Rather, they are the result of a process

of articulation. Placing articulation practices at the centre of the definition of values has two far-reaching consequences for our understanding of values. Firstly, value articulation is a relatively creative process. These experiences can be articulated in different ways, but not arbitrarily in all possible ways. The contingency of these experiences and the contingencies linked to the particular cultural tools that enable articulation should not be confused with total plasticity and indeterminacy – this is why we think vagueness is a better term here. If this vagueness did not exist, there would be no logical and pragmatic space for articulation (cf. Taylor, 1985; Viola, 2019, Serrano Zamora & Santarelli, 2021). If there were total indeterminacy, we would be talking about creation, not articulation. Secondly, articulation has a feedback effect on both our affective and conceptual relationships with values. Articulation does not mean translating and betraying the ineffability of experience with words and language. Articulation means developing experience from within.

The importance of articulation processes emerges also in a second definition provided by Joas. In a 2008 essay, Joas defines values as an «emotionally laden notion of that which is desirable» (p. 4). Values therefore have a conceptual dimension, a conceptual dimension, and this conceptual dimension of values can be the subject of disagreements, conflicts and partial negotiations, alongside a more general agreement that what is being discussed is a shared value (Santarelli, 2024).

Moving from this understanding of values, Joas sees values and norms as representing two different dimensions of human action and experience. Values are affectively laden conceptions of what is desirable, and therefore they represent *the attractive and inspirational dimension of human action and experience*. It is not just that we believe that a specific value is good. We are attracted and inspired by values we believe in. On the contrary, norms have to do with the restrictive and obligational dimension of human experience. We follow a norm and we believe it is right even if we do not feel any attraction towards it. And conversely, no norm can force us to believe that something – a specific person, an ideal, a group – is a value.

To give an example: the local government of our city is introducing many strict decorum rules. They are doing this because they want to promote the image of a clean, efficient city and they want their citizens to be proud of their clean and efficient city. Therefore, these measures are justified on the basis of local pride and identity. We might follow the new rules meticulously, and even believe that the new rules function well, without caring at all about local pride and identity. And, most importantly, no norms and no rules can automatically push us to believe in a specific value. The local government might organize initiatives in the public sphere and in schools to “educate”

people for local pride and identity. Yet, there is no automatic translation of norms into values, or *vice versa*. This understanding of values is clearly inspired by pragmatism: as we will see in the next paragraphs, William James and John Dewey are the main references in this regard.

It might obviously happen that norms are introduced to articulate and instantiate values in everyday social life. This takes place also in the case of the value of inclusion. Some individuals and social groups are not satisfied with the ongoing abstract references to the importance of “inclusion,” if these references are not accompanied by concrete measures (we will expatiate more on inclusion in the next section). Therefore, they might ask for an implementation of this abstract value through norms and procedures. In that case, norms are a pragmatic implementation of values (as theorized by Talcott Parsons), and their existence is justified through a reference to values (Heinich, 2017). It can also happen that obligations derive from values. If a specific person is an important value to me, then of course some obligations derive from the acknowledgment of this value. Yet, in both cases, we are referring to specific situations. What Joas’ theory denies is the fact that norms are by definition pragmatic implementations of values and that norms must always be justified by referring to values.

As aforementioned, Joas’ idea of the relative independence between values and norms is inspired by classic pragmatism. Especially important in this regard is James’ distinction between religiousness and morality: morality operates in the direction of the limitation of our action, insofar as it forbids some goals or inhibits some tools in the name of given rules; religiousness, instead, widens our possibilities of action, insofar as it points to new existential horizons, impassions us with new ways of life and educates us for new forms of feeling. Particularly revealing is James’ description of the “faith-state” that has both a cognitive and an affective side. As Joas appropriately remarks, this distinction must not be crystalized in a stark separation and, moreover, James does not overrate the importance of the merely cognitive side (which would be conducive to a reviviscence of Cartesian attitudes). When addressing the affective dimension, James (1982) prefers to spell out the faith-state as a «state of assurance» (p. 247), which presents some characteristic features:

The central one is the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the *willingness to be*, even though the outer conditions should remain the same. [...] The second feature is the sense of perceiving truth not known before. [...] A third peculiarity of the assurance state is the objective change which the world often appears to undergo. ‘An appearance of newness beautifies every object’ [...]. (p. 248)

We want to recontextualize these annotations within a possible dialogue between pragmatism and PCP: a description like James' may be read as an instantiation of the love of the world, which is able to detect and concentrate on what is valuable and, therefore, worthy of being passed on to the new generation – this being the core of the educational undertaking as understood via Arendt. The phrase about the “beautification” of objects with “an appearance of newness” may be a forceful Jamesian redescription of what happens when ‘something’ becomes a matter of study within the school qua *skholé* as presented by Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2013):

These are the rather rare but always magical moments when students and teachers are carried away by the subject matter, which, simply in being said, seems to take on a voice of its own. This means, firstly, that society is kept in some way outside – the classroom door shuts and the teacher calls for silence and attention. But secondly [...] [s]tudents are drawn from their world and made to enter a new one. Thus, on one side of the coin there is a suspension, that is, a rendering inoperable, a liberation. On the other, there is a positive movement: the school as present tense and middle ground, a place and time for possibilities and freedom. (p. 38)

One could be disturbed by the introduction of a religious vocabulary and, moreover, find this contradictory when referred to the idea of the study within *skholé* that Masschelein and Simons depict rather in terms of a “profanation,” construed as the act through which «something [...] is detached from regular use, no longer sacred or occupied by a specific meaning [...]. It is something, in this general (non-religious) sense, that has defiled or expropriated; in other words, something that has become public» (*Ibidem*). However, we must insist on the fact that we are appropriating James' tenets via Joas and, thus, religiousness refers here to that dimension of human activity which is inspirational, viz. «attractive, empowering, and motivating» (Joas, 2000, p. 66), and is intimately linked with the experience of the genesis of values as distinct from the compliance with norms.

Similarly, the gap between Masschelein and Simons' emphasis on the “becoming public” and the seemingly all too private character of the faith-state does not need to be overstated: the beautification of the object with an appearance of newness should not be taken as a segregated, merely internal or even ‘quasi-hallucinated’ experience but as a way to describe the first-person resonance of an experience – that of the genesis of values – which may be genuinely collective. This is all the more true in educational settings, insofar as, with an inflection of some PCP's motifs, we conceive of education in terms of the gathering around a thing that matters, in order to study it together; thereby a new collective of students – in the original participial acceptance of the word (students = those who study) and, thus, including

among them also teachers – emerges. From this perspective, we find once again an interweaving of the personal resonance and a collective experience.

As James (1982, p. 72) compares the faith-state with the being in love and with how this changes our own perception and existence in the world, we can connect this condition with Vlieghe and Zamojski's (2019) stress upon what they dub *educational love* as the chief element of the ontology of teaching qua thing-centred:

[W]hen acknowledged, love for a thing involves the necessity of sharing this love with others, and especially with the new generation. Saying 'yes' to one's love for a thing means that one recognizes that one cannot imagine living without studying this thing, and hence, one cannot possibly tolerate that the new generation remains deprived of a chance to study this thing, and that there would be no opportunity for this thing to be renewed by the new generation. (p. 36)

A cross-reading of James and PCP could grant new vistas both in terms of a 'pragmatist' take on PCP and of an enrichment of the Jamesian understanding of teaching. This is not, however, the main trajectory in the present argumentation: we are interested in pinpointing that, via James, Joas recontextualizes the classic distinction between the good and the right, viz. the desirable/valuable and the normative: the former is what enlarges our experience, opens up the self, by avoiding its encapsulation into given customs (morally positive as they may be in other respects) and contributes to a movement of self-transcendence, which is not the transcendence towards a different realm but rather a radical reorientation of our existence, thanks to which we look at the world with new eyes (and new I's, we can add with a pun); the latter is what defines the confines of legitimacy of our action, identifies what is due and obligatory in specific contexts and ensures the adequacy of our conduct in the light of received standards or rules.

From this perspective, the vocabulary of normativity – introduced in the *Manifesto* – risks betraying the deepest motif of a post-critical stance as distinct from a critical one. Indeed, the normative, as understood via Joas, is the «restrictive-obligatory» (Joas, 2000, p. 184) dimension of our action, what delimitates its range of appropriateness and helps us to identify the "right" thing to do. Far from being suitable for post-critique the vocabulary of normativity seems more aligned with that of critique: indeed, critique may be read also (if not fundamentally) as a contestation of given norms, by debunking their alleged neutrality and disclosing their hidden linkages with a state of privilege and dominion, as we will suggest in the next section.

We have already inflected James' individualistic picture towards a social dimension but it is the Dewey of *A Common Faith* that Joas draws on in order to fine-tune his pragmatist view of the genesis of values. While James'

insights into the genesis of values are momentous and deeply inspiring, they seem to be confined to the realm of extraordinary individual experiences of self-transcendence. They thus leave unexplored both the dynamics of the cultural articulation of these experiences into new values and the possibility of an intersubjective source of experiences of self-transcendence. Far from being limited to the realm of religion and faith, Dewey's arguments in his 1934 essay, *A Common Faith*, contribute to the clarification of these topical questions about the genesis of values.

From his perspective, ideals and values appear as the result of a creative process of idealizing contingent possibilities. The genesis of values involves a complex mixture of contingency and agency. The experience of contingent possibilities is an unexpected event that is beyond our conscious and deliberate control. We cannot simply choose to have or produce these experiences. However, human agency plays a role in the way in which these experiences and possibilities are creatively idealized and articulated in the form of values and ideals. Both at the level of experience and at the level of its articulation, the intersubjective dimension plays a role. The opening up of contingent possibilities and experiences of self-transcendence is by no means an exclusive prerogative of the individual. Rather, it can be achieved through processes of dialogue and communication. Moreover, intersubjective dialogue and communication also play a role in transforming these possibilities and experiences into shared ideals and values. The key role of intersubjective processes in no way downplays the close link between values and the self. From Dewey's perspective, the self is constitutively structured around the internalization of intersubjective relations. Therefore, the genesis and establishment of values produce a reorientation and unification of the whole personality.

In conclusion, Joas' pragmatist account of values grants an alternative perspective to the account of normativity implicitly endorsed by the founding text of PCP. This perspective emphasizes the complex coexistence of spontaneity and agency, of intersubjective and self-related processes, of experience and practice. Given their inspirational and captivating nature, and the contingent character of their emergence, values cannot be the subject of obligations.

Pedagogy of discomfort and/or pedagogy of self-opening?

In this section we are going to illustrate and further expand on the cluster of ideas introduced previously in reference to a specific notion, that of inclusion, which is arguably one of the, if not *the*, catchword(s) of a large

part of contemporary educational debate, especially when the social function of education is in the spotlight. As indicated above, we will develop our argumentation by dialoguing with the proposal of an ethics and pedagogy of discomfort, which José Medina (2014) delineates by elaborating on important ideas of Jane Addams. Medina's reflections can help us to start outlining a possible 'post-critical' pragmatist view of inclusion precisely because he, instead, tends to inflect pragmatism in a critical direction.

We will take our cue from a key theme of the pragmatist tradition, that of social sympathy. While it is present also in Dewey and James, Jane Addams has offered one of the most perceptive views of it. Throughout her work, she insisted on the importance of sympathetic knowledge in democratic and social life. Two points are worth noting here. First, Addams (2002) distinguishes between individual and social sympathy. Individual sympathy is based on the way in which a specific sympathizing subject represents the person who is the object of sympathy. This means that the person is the object of sympathy on the condition that she fits into the representation of the sympathizing person. As long as she exceeds this initial representation, she will not deserve sympathy anymore and will often stir up resented reactions. This is the reason why individual sympathy is often tainted by paternalism, sexism and classism. Workers lose the sympathy of their boss who treats them "as family," as soon as they start advancing their own economic claims. Daughters lose the family's support and love as soon as their desires and needs exceed the domain of family claims. Migrants start losing compassion and pity when they start acting as social actors provided with their own agency and interests, rather than merely as unfortunate victims of fate.

Therefore, Addams' main problem is not that people are merely self-interested and selfish, and that they do not care about the others. The problem is that they care about the others from an individual standpoint, i.e. from the standpoint of their personal and fixed understanding of what the others are and should be. To overcome these issues, it is necessary to move towards a socially framed ethics and to engage in social sympathetic knowledge. Social sympathetic knowledge involves at least three fundamental and deeply interrelated aspects. First, it is fallible. Adopting the standpoint of social sympathetic knowledge involves being open to the fact that our immediate sympathetic feelings are deeply seated in our implicit or explicit understanding of the others. This means that according to this understanding we might fail in sympathizing with someone who deserves our sympathy, and that we may immediately tend to have sympathetic feelings with people who deserve our reproach.

Secondly, sympathetic knowledge is social as long as it is open to the self-understanding and the self-determination of other people. This means that

other people are not merely the passive addressees of sympathy. Rather, the social character of sympathetic knowledge depends on the fact that we are open to the fact that our representations of other people can and often should be corrected through our relationship with them.

Thirdly, social sympathetic knowledge has a cognitive content. It is a source of social and moral knowledge of ourselves, of the others, and of society.

As Charlene Haddock Siegfried aptly points out, sympathy has necessarily to do with the capacity of dealing with perplexity, i.e. something that refers to “someone’s personal involvement in a situation that baffles and confuses her, because her usual understanding and responses are inadequate to explain or transform a troubling situation” (Siegfried, 2002, pp. xxv-xxvi). Rephrased in Dewey’s term, social sympathetic knowledge implies the capacity of accepting and dealing with problematic situations.

It is precisely this pivotal role of perplexity that Medina most emphasizes in his endeavour to outline a pragmatist pedagogy of inclusion. It is worth quoting him at a certain length:

The cultivation of perplexity that Addams recommends is the cultivation of our openness to being challenged and affected by other experiential perspectives. This critical experiential approach involves an ethical imperative: the imperative to renew our perplexities and to reinvigorate our openness to alternative standpoints, the imperative to constantly expand our personal as well as shared perspectives and sensibilities. Only when we live up to such imperative can we contribute to the formation of pluralistic communities and open publics that are committed to inclusion and social justice. The expansion of social sensibilities through the cultivation of perplexity facilitates pluralistic forms of *solidarity*. (Medina, 2014, p. 55).

The educational dividends of this approach are immediately thematized:

We are interested in the cultivation of *perplexity* and in educational practices and habits that resist *comfort* because they are the heart and soul of solidarity, of social empathy and a social ethics. It is in and through discomfort (i.e. through the disruption of the familiar and taken for granted) that we discover new possibilities of social relationality by paying attention to new forms of social identification. [...] The *ethics and pedagogy of discomfort* offers a more complex path for our cognitive-affective and socio-political melioration. Through practices of perplexity and discomfort (or resisting comfort) we can learn to go beyond the strictures of inherited cognitive and affective habits, and we can learn to envision new cognitive-affective attitudes and orientations toward others. (*Ibidem*)

What is most significant is *how* Medina develops the idea of a pedagogy of perplexity and discomfort, by construing it as a «fighting [against]

insensitivity» (p. 56). He understands insensitivity «in terms of blindness or numbness to the perspectives of others and their experiences. Thus, for example, racial insensitivity involves being numbed to racial problems and blind to the perspectives of racial others; and gender insensitivity involves being oblivious to, ignorant of, and in general not attuned to the experiences and problems of people differently gendered» (p. 57). Accordingly, the main focus of Medina's pedagogical proposal is that of creating educational situations which unearth those cognitive and epistemic dysfunctions and affective defence mechanisms that produce this kind of numbness and prevent people from even being conscious of them.

In the terminology of PCP, Medina's stance instantiates a *hermeneutical pedagogy* that aims at smoking out the «cognitive and affective obstacles that contribute to making people socially numbed to injustices [... and the] blindspots that result both in social ignorance and in self-ignorance» (*Ibidem*). Thereby, the pragmatist pedagogy of Medina is first and foremost critical and, as a matter of fact, he re-reads Addams and Dewey's views about social sympathy in the light of the «Queer Theory, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Critical Race Theory [that] teach us the importance of unmasking and undoing the process of social construction of our perspective, of interrupting the flow of familiarity and obviousness, making the familiar unfamiliar and the obvious bizarre» (p. 64).

It is a move that grants powerful insights into how to operate within educational settings in order to further inclusion by expanding sympathy and sympathetic knowledge and affection. By harping on Addamsian motifs, Medina conceives of this fight against insensitivity in terms of a rethinking of values but one can wonder whether his is not ultimately, instead, a work in a normative direction, to stick to the vocabulary introduced in the previous section. We are not taking the term "norms" in its strictest meaning nor do we want to insinuate that Medina envisions only what Joas would call the "restrictive" dimension of action. And yet, the pedagogy of discomfort, focusing on a work of negation, viz. of overcoming (of biases, obstacles etc.), does not seem to really instantiate that "attractive" and "inspirational" tension which belongs to the value-dimension.

To capture it in a formula, we can say that Medina's critical-pragmatist pedagogy of discomfort and perplexity performs a *self-disclosure* (= an unveiling – and, then, removing – of one's mechanisms of resistance to sympathy), whereas a post-critical pragmatist pedagogy should rather operate in the sense of a *self-opening* as predicated upon the faith/assurance in the possibilities of the expansion of human sympathetic interactions.

The distinction between self-disclosure and self-opening is as slight and decisive as that between hermeneutical pedagogy and what PCP calls “pedagogical hermeneutics” when arguing that

[i]t is precisely the challenges of living together in a common world that constitute the hope that make education continue to seem a worthwhile activity. Hermeneutics isn’t a (unsolvable) problem, but rather something educators need to create. We shouldn’t speak and act on the basis of a priori assumptions about the (im)possibility of real mutual understanding and respect, but rather show that, in spite of the many differences that divide us, there is a space of commonality that only comes about a posteriori. (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 16)

We would suggest redescribing this idea of PCP in the Deweyan terms of the miracle of communication, as Joas has valorized it qua the constantly renewed event of the overcoming of “self-centredness” and the experience of «the radical readiness to let oneself be shaken by the Other in order thereby to realize oneself with and through other people: as shattering intersubjectivity» (Joas 2000, p. 117).

Reading the Addamsian perplexity through the lens of Joas’ “shattering intersubjectivity” instead of through the critical stance of the fight against insensitivity is, in our interpretive proposal, a way to give it a post-critical spin: the focus is not so much on the dysfunctions to correct, on the defence mechanisms to dismantle and on the cognitive barriers to tear down as on a global re-orientation of the whole person. To marshal the Dewey of *A Common Faith* (on which Joas builds) we have to do with «a change of will conceived as the organic plenitude of our being, rather than any special change in will» (Dewey, 1986, p. 17). The whole person is not a natural datum, the internal, finally perceivable core of our self; as Joas aptly remarks, we have an imaginary relation to it in the sense that it emerges when the genesis of values, that creative process of idealization of contingent possibilities, takes place, that is,

when the imagination idealizes existence by laying hold of the possibilities offered to thought and action. [...] The idealizing imagination seizes upon the most precious things found in the climactic moments of experience and projects them. We need no external criterion and guarantee for their goodness. They are had, they exist as good, and out of them we frame our ideal ends (p. 33).

The whole person is our person insofar s/he experiences a thorough re-orientation of her/his relation with the world and is granted coherence through a «sense of values which carry one through periods of darkness and despair to such an extent that they lose their usual depressive character» (p.

11). We have to do with a sort of Deweyan faith-state «as the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices» (p. 23).

We should not misconstrue this post-critical reappropriation as a reconciled or comfortably peaceful process: the element of perplexity which lies at the very core of the Addamsian sympathy remains in the experience of a shattering intersubjectivity, something that baffles and confuses us. However, to deploy once again the terminology of PCP, instead of the negative-critical attitude which is on the lookout for what obstructs inter-human understanding (= hermeneutical pedagogy), the focus is here on the process of the formation of a broader and more unified self in connection with the imaginative relation to inclusive ideals that make real the possibility of mutual understanding and respect (= pedagogical hermeneutics).

PCP would call this an affirmative attitude but it does not lead to any affirmative theory of education in Benner's acceptance of the word. We can say that the danger of the latter is more present in conceptual devices like Medina's that may risk subordinating the educational agenda to other discourses insofar as education could be instrumentalized as ultimately a fight against some social ills. In the post-critical alternative view of inclusion that we have started outlining, the endeavour is, instead, first and foremost formative-educational insofar as it concerns the trans-formation of the self as a whole in its interaction with the world and, thus, the political implications of this undertaking – which are anything but absent – are indirectly attained rather than being in the forefront of the educational design.

The issue is not whether the critical or the post-critical approach is the most recommended when addressing the question of inclusion and social justice. Indeed, as argued elsewhere (Oliverio & Thoilliez, 2024), we should think of the relation of critique and post-critique in educational theory and philosophy (especially when coming to the meaning of education for society) in terms of a quasi-Bohrian complementarity in which each perspective offers an exhaustive picture of the phenomenon but these outlooks cannot be deployed at the same time. The combination of the mutual exclusivity and of the necessity of both perspectives in order to have a complete description of the phenomenon may be rooted, at least in our tradition, in the very insurgence of the Western educational project through a “philosophical-educational big-bang” (Oliverio, 2018). It is precisely the need for a co-existence of these two views that may be one more reason to include pragmatism in the conversation to the extent that it is a «corridor theory,» as Papini (1961, p. 405) famously put it, and can help us to orchestrate this complex regime of relationships within educational practices.

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Mingling and Resonance: Education as Guarding the World*

by Paolo Bonafede[^], Federico Rovea[°]

Abstract

Critical educators based their proposal on the question of teaching to *change* the world and society. Our aim is to contribute to a rethinking of the role of education in building a more just society through the new perspective of post-critical pedagogy (PCP). The authors propose to overpass the paradigm of *changing* the world, guided by the idea that education today should focus on *guarding* the world. We discuss two different concepts, that conceive PCP in two different ways: Hartmut Rosa's concept of 'resonance' on one side, and Michel Serres's idea of 'mingling' with the world on the other. Resonance delineates a manner in which individuals and the world engage in a relationship, ultimately shaping each other's form. Rosa's resonance theory is connected with critical theory: for Rosa, resonance is a space of meaning within the accelerated and alienating world. Instead Serres refuses the critical moment: according to him, the act of knowing does not rely on a respectful 'mingling' with the world that does not entail any critical stance. Through this term, Serres encapsulates an ecological approach to knowledge, proposing a just relationship with the surrounding world as the foundation of knowledge. We will build on these concepts in order to affirm two different interpretations of PCP and justice, generally conceived as a just relationship with the surrounding world.

* The present article is the result of a completely communal and shared process of thinking and writing. Nevertheless, "Resonance Theory", with its subparagraphs, and "Conclusions: which orientation for post-critique?" can be attributed to Paolo Bonafede. "Premise", "'Mingling' with the world: education and knowledge as mutual exchanges" and its subparagraphs can be attributed to Federico Rovea. However, the work in the specific sections was improved thanks to cross-checking and continuous dialogue between the two authors.

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Premise

The so called ‘post-critical’ pedagogy asserts the need for novel approaches to address injustice in education and to reconsider the connection between education and the world. How can we conceive the educational urge to work for a more equitable society outside the critical paradigm?

In this paper we intend to propose a paradigm that moves away from conceptual analysis – typically used in critique to unveil false conscience. Instead, we advocate a narrative language, utilizing examples crafted by influential authors, to suggest an educational approach focused on participation in the world, rather than mere revelation.

We will build our perspective through the concepts of resonance and mingling, in order to affirm two different possible post-critical approaches to education, generally conceived of as a just relationship with the surrounding world. In this paper we will consider as a starting point the stance on post-critical education as proposed by authors such as Vlieghe, Zamojski, Hodgson and Wortmann:

How to change and what to do instead are quite often out of focus. Consequently, post-critical pedagogy is committed to going beyond critique and to saying positively what is good and valuable in education, not only as a means to change or as the desirable changed state, but also to describe what is worthwhile to continue or maintain (Wortmann 2020, p. 1)

As stated by Wortmann, post-critical pedagogy seeks not only what should be changed in education, but it primarily focuses on what is valuable and should be defended. In addition, post-critical theorists seek languages to maintain pedagogy as an autotelic discipline, not dependent on other stances (and neither on the critique to such stances) such as psychology, economics or politics (Snir, 2021). Critiquing the meddlings of other actors (politics, the market etc.) in pedagogy – these authors claim – is not enough: what is needed is an affirmative way to conceive educational studies that does not deprive educators and students of hope in the future (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020). We will here consider post-critical pedagogy in the broadest sense of the term for the sake of clarity and concision, even though we are well aware that different conceptions of the post-critical are today proposed to the debate (see for instance Schildermans, 2020; Schwimmer, 2019).

Following on this stance, in this paper we aim at underlying that different approaches to post-critical education are possible and viable.

Resonance theory: from critical to post critical approach

In the first case we analyse, we show that the paradigm of *guarding* the world can be the consequence of an authentically critical approach. According to Hartmut Rosa (2019), there can be no post-critical perspective without a critical look at late modernity. A brief example can help to understand.

The Artists' example

Gustav and Vincent, two young artists, participate in a painting competition. Gustav prepares meticulously, procuring the best tools: a sturdy easel, proper lighting, a high-quality canvas, various brushes, and specific colours. After gathering all the necessary resources, he spends a lot of time contemplating the subject to paint, starting his work only at the last moment. Vincent, on the other hand, tears a sheet from his sketchbook, grabs watercolours, sharpens his pencils, puts on his favourite album, and begins painting without a clear idea. As he works, a world of shapes and colours takes form, resulting in a coherent piece.

The moral of the story is evident: Gustav's fixation on resources to ensure a superior work of art is the reason for his failure. This obsession prevents him from actually creating his artwork. Vincent, instead, focuses on self-expression, using only the resources already in his possession during the creative process. Despite there being no guarantee of success, Rosa (2019) argues that Vincent's chances of creating an artistic work are greater than Gustav's.

Emphasis on resource optimization and accumulation, as highlighted by Rosa, is reflected in educational practices that promote competition and individual success as primary goals. This can lead to the formation of stressful, hyper-competitive, institutionalised educational environments, within which students are pushed to excel at the expense of collaboration and mutual support. Gustav's artistic aridity is a reflection of that spasmodic search for painting tools that, obsessively accumulated, produce a stress from which it is not possible to generate creativity. Considering resources as an end and not as means to a higher end generates a de-synchronisation of identity. In the pedagogical sphere, this translates into the reduction of education to a process of acquiring skills, certifications and credentials useful only for the labour market, within which all personal ambitions are made to

converge with the prospect of a working career (Thompson, 2019, Faitini, 2023).

The relationship between alienation and resonance

The resonant relationship can never be considered a definitive overcoming of the condition of alienation, as it can only mature in the accelerated context in which we are immersed. Resonance is not a totalizing answer, but it is the expression of a partial perspective. Moreover, for Rosa, the ability to enter into a resonant relationship with the world requires a profound familiarity with the opposite condition of indifference or alienation. Indeed, even dissonances – such as conflicts, discrepancies and mutual ‘irritations’ – can even foster resonance (Peters & Schulz, 2017). In other words, the ability to feel a deep and meaningful connection to the world emerges despite, and sometimes because of, the tensions and challenges we encounter.

Capacity for resonance is grounded in prior experience of what is foreign, irritating, unappropriated, and especially what is inaccessible, eluding one’s grasp and expectations [...]. *Resonance is the momentary appearance, the flash of a connection to a source of strong evaluations in a predominantly silent and often repulsive world.* Hence moments of intense resonant experience (a sunset, captivating music, being in love, etc.) are always also filled with moments of intense longing. They contain the promise of a different way of relating to the world [...]. But they do not abolish the intervening moments of foreignness and inaccessibility (Rosa, 2019, p. 220).

In this sense Rosa’s analysis of the concept of alienation is relevant to critical pedagogy because, by highlighting the role of social and cultural structures in the formation of individual identity, it makes it possible to seek a different way of relating to the world:

A resonant relationship is without doubt a dynamic interaction between subject and world, a relation of fluidity and contact that is processual in nature. This suggests that, even at the conceptual level, resonant relationships presuppose a kind of *mutual, rhythmic oscillation*, and therefore must also satisfy certain demands of *synchronization* (Rosa, 2019, p. 44).

The declinations of resonance: just relationship, mutuality and vibrating wire

We chose to focus on the definition of resonance above, although it is not

the most complete one proposed by Rosa, because it highlights some interesting elements for our reflection. First, the overturning of the canon of poverty, understood also at the educational level. The poor is considered by Rosa as the one who accumulates in the escalatory logic of modernity: poverty lies in following the trend of acceleration, without creating a responsive relationship between oneself and the world.

In this context, Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance offers a profound shift in understanding poverty not as a mere lack of material resources but as a deficiency in meaningful relationships – both with the self and the surrounding world. Resonance, in Rosa's framework, is the ability to establish a two-way relationship where individuals not only influence but are also influenced by the world, fostering a sense of connectivity and responsiveness. From this perspective, justice in education is not achieved by merely providing equal access to resources but by fostering environments where students can develop resonant relationships with the world. This relational form of justice challenges the traditional educational paradigms that prioritise accumulation over the quality of the interactions that students have with the subject matter, their peers, and educators.

By fostering resonance, education can cultivate a sense of belonging and engagement, which is crucial for addressing the deeper, existential dimensions of poverty. This approach aligns with the critiques posed by educational theorists like Paulo Freire, who argued that traditional educational systems often perpetuate a form of 'banking education,' where students are passive recipients of knowledge, a process that inherently alienates and disempowers them (Freire, 1970).

Second, the concept of mutuality in resonance theory is assumed in an aesthetic perspective. According to Rosa, resonance is a relationship in which both the subject and the world influence and transform each other. Unlike an echo, resonance implies a responsive relationship, where both parties must express themselves with their own voice, maintaining a balance between closure (self-consistency) and openness (receptivity). This confirms the connection between resonance and phenomenological analyses of experience.

[H]uman beings' relationship to the world initially grew and grows out of resonances, while our reifying, objectifying relationship to things represents a comparatively late developmental or civilizational step requiring a number of preconditions (Rosa, 2019, p. 228).

In Merleau-Ponty's view (1945), we are always already in silent inner contact with things, before this connection is destroyed by being fixed in

language. The beginning of perception, as a condition for relating to the world in any way, lies in that opening of the subject to the world that takes place through the body, since every living being constantly processes the world through itself literally from the first breath¹.

Thirdly, the influence of music terminology in defining the theoretical framework of resonance. In the previous quote, Rosa uses the terms rhythm and synchronisation. To describe resonance, in other passages, Rosa uses the images of guitar sounding board. He draws on the dynamics between two bodies that influence each other reciprocally, producing their own frequencies. An example can help us to understand this: place two or more metronomes on an elastic surface, such as a thin board, which is in turn resting on two empty cans; this setup creates a 'resonant space' in which the board and cans begin to move gently, causing the metronomes to synchronise perfectly (Rosa, 2019). In this way, we can understand how resonant relationships represent a phenomenon of reciprocal influence, which synchronises the bond between the subjects to the same rhythm or frequency. Responsive resonance occurs when the two bodies react to each other's oscillatory impulses, initiating the connection bond that can lead to synchronisation.

For these reasons as well, one of the images that Rosa uses most to represent his concept of resonance is the vibrating wire. The 'resonating string' exemplifies how the subject and the world are connected through a bidirectional relationship. When a person is *touched* by an aspect of the world, they are not only influenced by it but actively respond, creating a continuous feedback loop. The resonating or vibrating wire represents a powerful symbol of the need for authentic and mutually transformative connections (Rosa, 2019, p. 163).

According to this perspective, we can formalise the notion of a vibrating wire between subject and world in emotional-sociological terms as an experience or condition in which the subject is affected, i.e. touched and moved, by some segment of world, at the same time responding with an accommodating, outwardly directed emotional movement, with intrinsic interest (libido) and a corresponding expectation of efficacy. Thus this notion of vibrating wire brings together the findings of the sensory elements we were

¹ Rosa marshals the concept of responsiveness (*Antwortgeschehen*), developed by Waldenfels, to explore the relationship between subject and world. Waldenfels (2022) argues that this link becomes evident when something new arises, causing astonishment or fear, and altering both subject and world. In music, this connection emerges between moments, emphasising that musical experience transcends a purely cognitive approach. The act of responding originates from the world, not the self, highlighting the paradox of creativity that requires a novel response.

talking about and becomes one with the musical and, more generally, aesthetic-artistic perspective that is presented in Rosa's concept of resonance.

Resonance theory and post critical pedagogy

In summary, resonance describes a way of being-in-the-world in a dialogical and ecological dimension. Educating, indeed, according to Rosa means reconnecting ourselves with the world through resonance experiences. These experiences are first of all sensorial and aesthetic bonds with the world, and originate interests and relationship with ourselves, the world and formative moments, that are their intersections.

Without love, respect, and esteem, our wires to the world – our axes of resonance – remain rigid and mute (Rosa, 2019, pp. 8-9).

Within this interpretative framework, resonance represents to all intents and purposes a project of post-critical pedagogy. Resonance theory draws its elements from critical theory (Adorno, 1966; Honneth, 1994), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), communitarianism (Taylor, 1989) and sociology. This plural origin allows for the development of alternative interpretations of educational research, opposing the stagnating trend that makes educational debates unsatisfactory and, oftentimes, paralysing (Latour, 2004). Resonance theory grasps aspects of pedagogy overlooked by traditional criticism and contemporary research, such as the importance of emotional and affective connections in the learning process, the role of reciprocal influence between students and their environment, and the cultivation of a sense of belonging and identity through educational experiences.

For these reasons, the construct of resonance represents a springboard for infecting pedagogical enquiry by valorising the creativity and novelty of trans-formative experiences: from this theoretical assumption it is in fact possible to carry out descriptive analyses, which search in the pathos of the educational response for presuppositions and situations that favour resonant experiences, and consequently initiate research into the innovation of pedagogical practices.

‘Mingling’ with the world: education and knowledge as mutual exchanges

We can now move to a different framing of the call for guarding the

world, one that aims at refusing the critical moment to point at something different. Michel Serres, eclectic French philosopher of science, has extensively reflected on our relationship with the outside world, proposing a paradigm that privileges mutual exchange over the critical attitude. Michel Serres has developed his thinking in an extremely long and prolific career, which is nearly impossible to summarise in a reasonable space. It is nevertheless necessary to know that he was trained as a mathematician who developed interests in the history of sciences, in communication theories, in literature and philosophy. Along this multifaceted intellectual path he has developed a unique style of writing, often depicted as obscure or excessively literary but, on the other hand, that extended his success way beyond the academic audience. Serres books are built around personal anecdotes, examples from various disciplines and a plethora of fictional characters that embody ideas. Such books rarely present arguments in the traditional sense of the term, as they are more concerned with stimulating thinking than presenting ready-made theories. We will, consequently, try to gather some of his provocations without claiming to present and discuss his ‘actual’ theories.

According to Serres, the Western philosophical canon – focused on theory and abstraction – has fostered a relationship with the world characterised by a violent extraction of significance. Scientist and philosophers, Serres claims, are used to observing reality from a safe distance and to extract from them observations and rules (Serres, 2008). Vision dominates on the other senses and theory dominates over other ways of knowing the world. In the first chapter of his book *The five senses* (1985) Serres mockingly narrates of a philosopher in his armchair, who is describing in detail a tree standing out of his window. Such a philosopher – some critics have identified him as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Abbas, 2005), as Serre’s disinclination for phenomenology was notorious – is knowledgeable about the tree, but he does not really taste it, because he avoids a bodily and sensory relationship with it.

Serres argues that authentic knowledge, differently, is rooted in a comprehensive sensual experience, which is inherently mutual between the sensible being and the world: when we touch or smell something, we build knowledge by integrating our bodies with reality, instead of observing it from a distance. Abstraction, continues Serres, divides reality while sensibility builds relationships:

Many philosophies refer to sight; few to hearing; fewer still place their trust in the tactile, or olfactory. Abstraction divides up the sentient body, eliminates taste, smell and touch, retains only sight and hearing, intuition and understanding. To

abstract means to tear the body to pieces rather than merely to leave it behind: analysis (Serres, 2008, p. 26).

More specifically, Serres points at the sense of touch as the most fundamental form of sensibility. By reflecting on touching, he claims, we can rebuild our conception of knowledge in a more respectful and significant way. If many protagonists of the philosophical and pedagogical canon have proposed to look at reality in terms of veiling/unveiling or unseeing/seeing (meaning that what good education and knowledge do is helping you unveiling reality to see how it truly is), Serres proposes touching as an alternative paradigm. By touching, Serres claims, we do not aim at unveiling reality, but we rather follow its fabric, we give ourselves to the wefts of the world, we discover them and we become part of them. Furthermore, Serres claims that a sensible relation to the world is not only a matter of good or bad knowledge, but that it has to do with the human's most specific character. Indeed he states that the specific of the *homo sapiens* is not intellectual knowledge (thus accepting the meaning of the latin verb *sapere* as to know) but sensibility (referring the same verb *sapere* to a more ancient etymology that translates it with to savor or to taste). *Homo sapiens* should be seen as the animal that can savor the world rather than the one that understands it, and to become more *sapiens* we need to learn to taste it more sensibly (Serres, 2001).

Veils and canvases: Pierre Bonnard

Let us clarify this through an example, quoted at length from Serre's *The five senses*:

In the 1890s, Pierre Bonnard painted a bathrobe; he painted a canvas in which a bathrobe is depicted, and a woman amidst leaves. The brown-haired woman, seen from behind, half turning to the right, as if she were hiding, is wrapped in a very long, voluminous piece of yellowish-orange fabric entirely covering her standing figure, from the nape of her neck to her feet [...] If you removed the leaves and the bathrobe, would you touch the skin of the brown-haired woman or the canvas of the picture? Pierre Bonnard is not so much appealing to sight as to touch, the feeling beneath the fingers of films and fine layers, foliage, material, canvas, surface, defoliation, undressing, refined unveilings, thin caressing curtains. His immensely tactful and tactile art does not turn the skin into a vulgar object to be seen, but rather into the feeling subject, a subject always active beneath the surface. The canvas is covered in canvases, veils pile up and veil only other veils, the leaves in the foliage overlap each other (Serres, 2008, pp. 28-29).

According to Serres, the paintings by French artist Pierre Bonnard exemplify a different approach to knowledge and touch. Bonnard's works often depict scenes filled with fabrics and textiles, where these fabrics overlap and interact with one another. In Bonnard's paintings, fabrics are not meant to cover something, suggesting that a 'naked' reality is hidden beneath them; rather, reality itself is a fabric composed of layers that cover other layers. Even the human protagonists of Bonnard's paintings – such as the woman in the bathrobe or the girl in *Young girl sitting with a rabbit* (1891) – are melted with the surrounding elements. Their skin is a canvas among other canvases and its fabric seems knitted with the rest of the painting. The observer's eye, therefore, wanders among the textiles, continuously following their weaving. Bonnard seems to suggest that truth is in the wandering itself, as there is nothing under the veil except another veil.

We can further reflect on this stance and affirm that Bonnard's (and Serres') approach to knowledge suggests a respectful relationship of exchange between the subject and the world. We can here glimpse a form of ecology of knowledge and an ontology that radically refuses the dichotomy of surface/depth. Knowing, according to this paradigm, means knotting different veils instead of lifting them, and the same can be said about education (van der Tuin & Zuurmond, 2021). Educating, indeed, according to Serres means becoming more sentient: if knowing is a matter of senses and exchange, what we should educate in the first place is not the mind but the sentient body. Becoming more sensible – or more subtle in our exchanges with the world's fabric – is the ultimate goal of education as a search for authentic knowledge: 'I am nothing other than the other things, plus the other men in the world. Then and then only, do I understand' (Serres, 2011, p. 56).

Michel Serres articulates this concept as a form of 'mingling', it is to say as a reciprocal interaction between the body and the surrounding world, emphasizing that our sensory experiences are inherently intertwined with the environment. According to Serres, this mutual exchange disrupts the traditional subject-object dichotomy, positing instead that the body and the world are in a continuous state of co-creation and transformation. This dynamic relationship underscores the notion that perception is a process of mutual influence, where the boundaries between the perceiver and the perceived are fluid and porous. Serres' perspective invites a reevaluation of how we understand embodiment and sensory engagement, highlighting the inseparability of human experience from the material and temporal context in which it unfolds:

The skin and touch signify, finally, for Serres, a way of being amid rather than standing before the world, and are necessary for knowledge. Knowledge, which has previously and traditionally thought of itself as an unveiling or stripping bare, is

offered here as a kind of efflorescence, an exploration amid veils, a threading together of tissues. Tissue, textile, and fabric provide excellent models of knowledge, excellent quasi-abstract objects, primal varieties: the world is a mass of laundry (Connor in Abbas, 2005, 157)

The knowing body: a climber's experience

Let us look into one more example of mingling from Serres' philosophy. Bonnard's example, indeed, focuses on the mixture of the different 'veils' of the world, but does not tell us much about how our individual body experiences such a mixture. Another story, taken from Serres' *Variations on the body* (2011) will help us with this question:

I'm walking over ground of a gradually steepening pitch. At a certain point, I pause and start using my hands; the real mountain begins. I'm climbing. [...] The least false step and gravity, swiftly, takes its revenge. The body relies only on its valor and the generosity of those who expect nothing in return. This fair harshness teaches the truth of things, of others and oneself, without pretense. [...] The more I think, the less I am; the more I am, the less I think and the less I act. I don't see myself as a subject, stupid project; only things and others are found (Serres, 2011, pp. 3-8).

The body, Serres claims, changes when connected to the outside world. As the experience of the mountain climber suggests, when one takes the courage to leave their protected position far from reality, their body starts to reconnect with the world and starts, in a sense, to assimilate to it. The limits between human, animal and things start to blur and the body becomes again an element of the world among others. The body in movement into the world, Serres proceeds, knows the world in a very peculiar sense. It does not gain new intellectual information but it rather loses some of its individuality to 'become' different. When climbing, the climber stops thinking and starts knowing the world by means of touching it. This example, finally, suggests that the way of knowing through touching entails a loss of individuality instead of an enlargement of it (as traditionally conceived: I am more because I know more). It is worth noting that Serres does not mean to fall into an irrational conception of knowledge that refuses intellectuality and science. Quite the opposite, the author intends to honour science by putting it at its right place as a function of a knowing body and not as a solely abstract game that forgets the world:

Clever, hypocritical and lying, the speech that explores who I am – full of vanity when it fidgets within the hidden recesses of a warm and lazy interior – again

becomes instructive and fair (I insist upon once again taking up this adjective) as soon as the body exposes itself to cold, danger and death, in the most intense osseous, muscular, perceptual, metabolic, respiratory, sanguineous, total activities: neither the body nor speech, then, can dream, strut, cheat or lie (Serres, 2011, p. 8).

To sum up, we could say that according to Serres knowledge, and consequently education, are characterised by ‘mingling’. This term encapsulates a relationship of exchange between a knowing body and the world, where one becomes part of the other. The body in contact with the world loses some of its individuality to become something else, and thus gaining a lived knowledge. The world, as a collection of textures without depth, is knowable by means of becoming part of the weaving or, better said, by leaving a predominant position to accept the interchange with things and others.

Do we still need critique? A ‘gun shy’ approach

Both because of his biography – he lived through WWII and the atomic threat of the Cold War – and of his intellectual convictions, Serres always described himself as ‘gun shy’ intellectual:

I’m not talking about intellectual content but about atmosphere. Terrorism reigned; I could even recount the sordidness of private life. Thus, already scarred by historic events, I was later made gun shy by the intellectual atmosphere (Serres & Latour, 1995, p. 5).

Serres refused every form of war, be it real or intellectual. His theory is a clear reflex of this inclination: he never engages in debates, he never questions someone else’s ideas but he rather proposes his own vision to the reader without referring to anyone else. The examples we have presented are clear about this: Serres’s approach to knowledge is strictly individual and bodily founded, debate has no space in it. Following the fabric of the world is an act that does not necessarily entail discussion with others. Serres’s epistemology, we could say, is radically non-violent.

These epistemological assumptions have interesting consequences on how to conceive the educational process (van der Tuin & Zuurmond, 2021; Serres, 1997; 2017) and the critical approach. Indeed, according to Serres, education should encourage individual exploration and curiosity, invention and creativity. Both the idea of education as a pass-on to the next generation of a pre ordered set of knowledge or as a path towards liberation are refused by Serres. Authentic knowledge lies in the ‘mingling’ between body and world: consequently, authentic education should be worried about helping

the young to experience such forms of mingling. The world, we could add, does not call to be criticised, nor to be known as it ‘truly is’, but it rather calls to be explored just as it presents itself. Critique – marked by its never-ending game of dismantling false conscience – ends up distracting from what really matters in education: assisting the younger generation in their own original ‘mingling’ with the world.

Conclusions: which orientation for post-critique?

The concepts of Mingling, as proposed by Michel Serres, and Resonance, particularly in the sense of a ‘vibrating wire’ as articulated by Hartmut Rosa, share at least two significant points of convergence. Firstly, both concepts seek to redefine the educational relationship with the world, moving away from an approach that reifies the world and towards one that emphasises a dynamic and continuous connection. Serres and Rosa advocate an understanding of the subject-world relationship not through the lens of domination, revelation, or distancing, but rather as an ongoing intertwining, particularly through perceptual and sensory dimensions. This post-critical educational paradigm promoted by both authors calls for a reconceptualization of our interaction with the world, emphasising immersion and engagement over detachment and objectification.

The second point of convergence between Mingling and Resonance lies in the bidirectional nature of the connection they describe. Both concepts envision a relationship where each pole – subject and world – is active, responsive, mutable, and constructively open to encounter. This bidirectional engagement provides a foundation for a pedagogy of the encounter, where education is seen as an interactive and transformative process. In this context, learning becomes an experience of mutual influence and co-creation, rather than mere transmission of knowledge.

Despite these points of convergence, there remains a tension due to the differing philosophical backgrounds of the two authors. Rosa’s work is deeply rooted in critical theory, drawing from the tradition of social critique to address issues such as social acceleration and alienation. In contrast, Serres adopts an ecological perspective that eschews the critical moment entirely. Rosa maintains a dialectical tension between critique and post-critique, acknowledging that resonance is often born out of a prior state of alienation. This tension reflects the idea that true engagement and resonance with the world can only emerge from a recognition and overcoming of alienating forces (Bonafede, 2025).

Serres, on the other hand, proposes a post-critical approach that entirely bypasses the critical phase, arguing that critique itself constitutes a disrespectful and reifying relationship with the world. This is exemplified in Serres's metaphor of the veil, which suggests that the act of unveiling or critiquing inherently distorts and objectifies the world. By rejecting the critical moment, Serres advocates a more immediate and respectful engagement with the world, one that emphasises connection and mingling over separation and analysis.

Despite these philosophical divergences, both authors contribute to the search for new pathways and vocabularies in contemporary pedagogy. Rosa's framework suggests that resonance, as a response to the pressures of modernity and social acceleration, can offer a partial but crucial means of fostering meaningful interactions with the world. Serres, meanwhile, provides a vision of education that is rooted in ecological thinking and emphasises the importance of direct, respectful engagement with the world. In summary, while Rosa and Serres come from different philosophical traditions and propose distinct approaches, their work converges in the shared goal of redefining the educational relationship with the world. This convergence offers valuable insights for developing a post-critical pedagogy that emphasises dynamic, responsive, and respectful interactions with the world.

Nevertheless, the question is which orientation to consider for the post-critical approach in education. In considering the post-critical approach in education proposed by Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski (2017), we are confronted with a fundamental question: is critique an essential precursor to the development of a post-critical, positive pedagogy, or should it be abandoned entirely in favour of a fresh, unburdened perspective? This inquiry probes whether critique serves as a necessary stage in opening the horizon for a pedagogy that is constructive and forward-looking, or if it is a relic of a past that impedes genuine educational progress. If we view critique as a necessary preliminary moment, it suggests that the process of engaging critically with the world is required to clear away the obstacles of alienation and social acceleration, as Rosa argues. This approach posits that only after addressing and overcoming these barriers can a space be created for resonance and meaningful connection. The critical moment, in this sense, is not an end in itself but a gateway to a richer, more engaged educational theoretical framework. If we take this position, the term post-criticism takes on a historical-diachronic connotation, whereby every 'post-critical possibility' originates in the moment of criticism.

Conversely, the alternative perspective, as articulated by Serres, challenges the need for any critical phase at all. Should we leave critique

behind without regret, focusing solely on pedagogies that are free from the shadows of past human shortcomings? Serres' approach suggests that the act of critique itself, by its very nature, imposes a distancing and objectifying lens on the world, one that ultimately hinders rather than helps our educational relationships. If critique is seen as inherently destructive or distorting, then perhaps the most just and effective pedagogy is one that begins with a clean slate, emphasizing immediacy, mingling, and positive engagement from the outset. This raises the question of whether a post-critical pedagogy can ever truly emerge if it remains tethered, even unconsciously, to the remnants of critical thought. This attitude is summarised by Serres with the term 'third person' education, it is to say education based on things rather than on the subject (first person) or on society (second person) (Serres, 1997).

In light of these perspectives, the debate between Rosa and Serres illustrates the broader philosophical tension within post-critical education: can we reconcile the need for critique as a means of overcoming alienation with the desire for a pedagogy that bypasses critique entirely? Or must we choose between a path that acknowledges the necessity of addressing the "diseases of the human" before moving forward and one that insists on an immediate, unmediated engagement with the world? The answers to these questions will shape the trajectory of post-critical educational theory and practice, influencing whether we see education as a process of healing and overcoming or as an entirely new beginning unencumbered by past critiques.

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Re-assembling the Digital World, or the Public Sociology of Digital Education Platforms

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Abstract

In the contemporary educational landscape, digital technologies have become an obligatory passage point, often appearing neutral, to the extent that they are rarely put under scrutiny and discussion. However, these are necessary steps in order to eventually reimagining them to attune to specific educational discursive frames. This article moves from the assumption that there is a need for educational researchers, educators and other relevant educational subjects to coalesce in a collective mobilisation that brings at the centre of public and policy debate the politics of digital education technology through a work of collective problematisation and reinvention. In order to contribute to this urgency, this article thus presents the theoretical and methodological underpinnings, and the results, of an experiment in what we call a public sociology of educational technology. Drawing on Michael Burawoy's plea for a Public Sociology (2004), our aim was to design and play with a methodology apt to carry out a work of creative and affirmative critique. The experiment was carried out by the L@bed Collective during the second edition of the Reclaim the Tech (RTT) Festival, held in Bologna in May 2024. During the workshop we invited our public to engage in a conversation about the design of the UNICA platform and its performative effects. We did this through a combination of two methods, walkthrough and a/r/tography, aimed respectively to playfully dis- and re-assemble materially the UNICA platform. We present some preliminary considerations on the insights which we gathered from such an experiment in public sociology of educational technology, with a specific reference to both the potential and limits of our methodology and the insights of such a collective work of denaturalisation, problematisation and reinvention.

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Introduction

Digital technologies are increasingly becoming everyday features in our educational landscapes. While digital transformation/innovation continues to be on top of any global or local policy agenda which intends to modernise education and deal with its supposed crisis, at the same time – and paradoxically –, platforms, apps, digital contents and their infrastructures are increasingly taken for granted as part of the machinery of our educational life. Vibrant controversies may be observed in the public and policy discourse on the digital transformation in education which are typically animated by polarised integrated or apocalyptic positionalities that are often detached from the grey realities of educational practices. However, in our daily and “private” educational lives, we “naturally” assemble ourselves with a multifarious and heterogeneous ensemble of digital technologies. This is mostly due to the fact that the digital – as code and space, material infrastructure and epistemic terrain, as a timescape and an ethics – has become an obligatory passage point for many students, teachers, educators, parents, and administrators. This holds both for those who have to follow the flows of their daily educational lives, and for those who are called to govern them, eventually dealing with the multiple crises of education. As an outcome, in our reading, this leads to the “hollowing out” of any public space where the politics and materiality of educational digital technology can be put under scrutiny, discussed, and eventually re-invented, re-locating it within a wider discursive frame that deals with our conceptions about what education is and what it means to educate.

Given this scenario and its apparent paradoxes, this article moves from the assumption that there is a need for educational researchers, educators and other relevant educational subjects to coalesce in a joint mobilisation that brings at the centre of public and policy debate the politics of digital education technology through a work of collective problematisation and re-invention. There is the need to create concrete utopias¹ (Lefebvre, 1974), that

¹ We use Lefebvre’s notion of concrete utopias here to refer to an attitude, a utopian disposition which moves from knowing and criticizing the real, explores its possibilities, and relies on such a work to imagine proposals for another “world”. Such a form of utopianism

is, spaces where to mobilise knowledges and methodologies which can make such a work of problematisation and re-invention possible.

This is especially urgent at a time when key educational processes such as curriculum development, classroom communication, assessment and evaluation, guidance and school management are increasingly re-intermediated through digital platforms and apps (Decuypere et al., 2021). In order to contribute to this struggle, this article intends to present the theoretical and methodological underpinnings, and the results, of an experiment in what we call a *public sociology of educational technology*, carried out by the L@bed Collective² during the second edition of the *Reclaim the Tech* (RTT) Festival³, held in Bologna in May 2024.

In designing such an experimental experience, the L@bed Collective was influenced by Michael Burawoy's plea for a *Public Sociology* (2004), a sociology whose challenge is to engage multiple publics in ways that enact a knowledge back-translation and create the conditions for making public issues out of private troubles, in response to the privatisation of everything. Public sociology represents a sociological endeavour which creates new visible, thick, active, local publics, or often counter-publics, inviting them into horizontal conversations whose aim is to establish the terrain for processes of mutual education (Burawoy, 2004, p. 8). Consistently, our aim was to design a methodology (and "play" with it) that allows for carrying out a work of affirmative critique, hence reconnecting to the debate of post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2018; Gorur et al., 2024). When dealing with digital technologies, this would mean to increase the attention paid to how education intersects with concepts such as platformisation, automation and datafication (Selwyn, 2024), making an effort to open spaces for the re-invention of the relationship between education and technology. Such a methodology consists of a joyful yet sociologically-informed analytical machinery whose aim is to allow heterogeneous social actors (an educational public) to come together, free itself from the strictures of technological determinism and solutionism (Grimaldi, Landri & Taglietti, 2020), and engage with such a politically and

does not deny social, spatial or historical realities but takes them into consideration – deal with them – in order to explore its possibilities.

² The multidisciplinary Research Laboratory on Education and Digitalisation founded by the Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies of the National Research Council of Italy (CNR-IRPPS) and the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Naples "Federico II".

³ *Reclaim The Tech* is a community on the move, fighting for digital justice. In a world marked by conflicts and transformations, the RTT community seeks a space for hybridisation and reappropriation of technologies, open to alliances with the demands for social, gender and climate justice (<https://reclaimthetech.it>).

analytically driven work of denaturalisation, problematisation and re-invention through a “playful” activity.

In this article we will first present the theoretical and methodological traits of such a methodology, which combined the *walkthrough method*, developed by Light and colleagues (2018), as a way of critically engaging with platform/app critical analysis, with the technique of a/r/tography (Leavy, 2020), a creative form of practice-based research which bridges the arts and education to create opportunities to consider other ways of knowing the world. After, we will offer an in-vivo account of our experiment in *public sociology of educational technology* during the RTT Festival in Bologna, where we mobilised our methodology in a public workshop titled *School and critical approaches to digital platforms*, whose aim was to collectively problematise the pervasive effects of digital platforms on the current forms of schooling, and reimagine together alternative approaches to the digitalisation of school education. In designing the workshop, we decided to put the question ‘*What technologies for education guidance?*’ at the forefront, also given the recent launch of the UNICA platform (<https://unica.istruzione.gov.it/it>) by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM). UNICA is a digital platform designed and published by the MIM «to accompany girls and boys on their growth path, to help them make informed choices and to cultivate and bring out their talents»⁴. All Italian schools, teachers, students and families are required to use the platform and deal with it. The aim of the platform is to digitally centralise and support students’ guidance process and school choice. As such, the platform provides several resources for students’ parents and teachers who are specialised in educational guidance and/or act as tutors for guidance within their schools. For each one of these different possible audiences, private areas, accessible only by logging in with SPID⁵ or CIE⁶, have been arranged within the platform, making users follow different navigational paths, based on their acknowledged role. Consistently, during the workshop we invited our public to engage in a conversation about the design of this specific platform, its performative effects but mainly to start from its dis-assemblage to reimagine or re-invent a digital technology for educational guidance.

In the last section of this article, we present some preliminary considerations on the insights which we gathered from such an experiment in *public sociology of educational technology*, with a specific reference to

⁴ <https://unica.istruzione.gov.it/it>.

⁵ That is, “Servizio Pubblico Identità Digitale”, the official Italian Public Digital Identity System.

⁶ That is, “Carta d’Identità Elettronica”, the official Italian Electronic ID, that can also be used online as a digital ID.

both the potential and limits of our methodology and the results of such a collective work of denaturalisation, problematisation and re-invention. We will argue that our experiment clearly shows how:

- a work of collective reflexivity on our relationships with educational digital technologies cannot prescind from a focus on the epistemic and governmental inscriptions of digital technologies, which means analysing technologies in their socio-materiality and their capacity to contribute to the re-configuration of the spatial, temporal and ethical axes of educational lives;
- this work has to be carried on through a methodology that moves away from the (dystopic) risks of technological determinism and recognises the relational character of any process of technological use;
- such a methodology has to be public, in a sense that it has to be designed in order to value the different knowledges, perspectives, capacities and creativities which constitute the richness of any educational collective where teachers, educators, students and researchers engage themselves in the creation of digitally-mediated educational concrete utopias.

Experimenting with affirmative critique: walkthrough and a/r/tography methods for public sociology

In this paragraph, we will describe and delve into the techniques that have been used for our “experiment” of public sociology dealing with the governmental educational platform UNICA. As we will see, the methodology exposed here constitutes an “unconventional” way of coupling dis-assembling (critical) techniques with re-assembling (affirmative) techniques in a participatory way, with the aim of opening up new paths to non-merely-academic research and forms of public sociology. In other words, the techniques presented here have been adjusted to the aim of developing a participative and collective process of denaturalisation, problematisation and re-invention of a specific digital educational tool through a “playful” activity.

In fact, if on the one hand the aim of the workshop was to collectively “dis-assemble” the educational platform and its materiality to gain a better insight of its scope and features, on the other hand, a second phase of the workshop has been dedicated to a “creative” process of collective reimagination, aimed at re-assembling and creatively redesigning the platform. As such, the methodology has been composed of a “dis-assembling” technique to address the materiality of the platform, namely the “walkthrough” method (Light et al., 2018), and of an imaginative/creative technique, i.e., “a/r/tography” (Springgay et al., 2005). We will now first

briefly describe these two techniques separately, and then delve deeper into how they have been coupled and applied to the case described here.

The walkthrough method

The walkthrough method, developed by Light and colleagues (2018), is a way of critically engaging with an app's Graphical User Interface (GUI)⁷, basing on the consideration that GUIs are, in fact, cultural artefacts incorporating relations, visions, practices, and governance patterns, thus suggesting that interfaces can be critically described and qualitatively analysed. Inspired by Cultural Studies and Science & Technology Studies, the walkthrough method aims to reconstruct an interface's context of deployment and 'environment of expected use' by examining «its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences» (*Ibid.*, p. 882). As the authors explain:

The core of this method involves the step-by-step observation and documentation of an app's screens, features and flows of activity – slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use in order to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis. The researcher registers and logs into the app, mimics everyday use where possible and dis-continues or logs out while attending to technical aspects, such as the placement or number of icons, as well as symbolic elements, like pictures and text. This process is contextualised within a review of the app's vision, operating model and governance (p. 882).

Hence, the walkthrough method entails a close interaction with an interface in order to collect qualitative data (field notes, screenshots, etc.) that shed light on the material (e.g., technical) and immaterial (e.g. cultural) elements composing it. This inquiry-oriented interaction can be performed individually or collectively. Further, the method also involves an analysis of the interface's broader context of deployment (e.g., to gain insights about the organisation deploying the interface – in our case, the MIM). Even though this method of inquiry was specifically conceived to analyse apps, it may also be used to examine other kinds of GUIs, for instance digital platform GUIs. GUIs make the backend of the platform visible and support/enable – e.g., by sequencing or illustrating – the performance of activities and interactions (Decuypere et al., 2021). In this sense, GUIs are the most

⁷ GUIs are what the user see on their screen when using and navigating a platform/app, i.e. a set of text and visual elements (buttons, images, etc.).

“visible” part of a platform and, at the same time, an artefact through which a certain order of things can be described and organised.

GUIs intermediate the relations between the different actors involved, defining and regulating the forms of exchange and interaction possible between them. In this sense, GUIs enable certain activities while simultaneously defining their codes of conduct. In other words, they configure – define, enable and constrain – users (Woolgar, 1990) and their likely (inter)actions, defining the “roles” and “script” they will have to adhere to (Akrich, 1992). In fact, although neutral in appearance, GUIs intervene in user relations, making certain practices, interactions and activities feasible, but also proposing and making certain conceptions and specific imaginaries relating, e.g., to learning and education, (in)visible. In this sense, GUIs (and the apps and platforms they participate in) do not merely facilitate and intermediate the sharing of content or the performance of activities but constitute new forms of organisation (Decuyper et al., 2021). The tools, values and ideas inscribed in the architecture and design of GUIs make it possible to propose and define certain practices by making them divisible, intelligible, knowable and implementable (to the detriment of others). Considering these aspects when talking about the deployment of platforms or apps, allows us to highlight the different dynamics, choices, materialities and actors involved, as well as their contingency and situatedness. Designers’ visions and assumptions play a crucial role in this entanglement, as they imagine and define different user groups and their relations with the platform (and among themselves). In other words, the ontological power of educational platforms configure (enable, constrain and define) their users (Gorur & Dey, 2021). While such a role is not always detectable in a deterministic way, its traces can be found by looking at how the interface mechanisms and features may encourage or discourage certain interactions between users and platform, or by asking how the interface supports certain discourses and/or conceptions of educational practices.

The walkthrough method is a way of engaging directly with an interface to explore its technological mechanism and cultural and ethical visions. As such, this method offers means to dis-assemble and problematise GUIs’ taken-for-grantedness. Given that GUIs are nowadays a constitutive dimension of many social realms (e.g., the entanglement of educational platforms and the way educational practices are conceived, acted and experienced), analysing GUIs in a collective way may become a form through which public sociology can be performed.

Arts-Based Research and the a/r/tography technique

With Arts-Based Research (ABR) we refer to a set of methodological

tools used by researchers across various disciplines and stages of social research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation and presentation of results (Leavy, 2020). ABR moves from the idea that creative arts can be adapted in order to address social research's concerns and questions in ways that are holistic and that intertwine theory and practice.

ABR, thus, challenges methodological and epistemological conventions, as well as pre-constituted assumptions about what research is and should be: for this reason, it implies a reflexive work aimed towards the renegotiation of disciplinary boundaries and standards, taking part in the debate concerning the presumptuous claim of objective knowledge production in social sciences.

As Eisner (1997) put it, as social scientists we have grown accustomed with the idea that our knowledge should be solid and our data hard, as they were a secure place on which to stand. Conversely, knowledge as a process, as a temporary state, is uncomfortable to many. Hence, with ABR, one of the key intents is to emphasise the need to see and create research in different shapes (Leavy, 2020), recoding social research as a creative craft. While Arts-Based Research is a broad field, the various methods it comprises share some common tenets, such as participation, openness and publicness.

In the educational field, ABR has a far-reaching history and a rich tradition (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018) which moves from the early theoretical premises about the pedagogical potential of art (Dewey, 2008; Biesta, 2017), and argue for its relevance towards multi-modal meaning making and communication (Thomson, 2024), collaboration and self-awareness (Hickey-Moody, 2013; Thomson, 2024), and even to engage in students' (and teachers') reflection concerning the world and their place in it (Wright et al., 2021).

A specific strand of Arts-Based Research which engages with educational practices and settings is *a/r/tography* (Leavy, 2020; Irwin, 2013). *A/r/tography* is a research methodology, a creative practice and a performative pedagogy: in other words, it is practice-based research which bridges the arts and the education, leveraging the former to retrieve education as a moment of encounter, a shifting of consciousness, an opportunity to consider other ways of knowing our world (Irwin, 2013). The original graphic rendering of the word, thus, is precisely to weigh the entanglement of the different roles – artist/researcher/teacher – which is indeed a displacement of such roles.

A/r/tography combines the activities of art-making, researching and teaching, resulting in a living inquiry which takes advantage of the space in-between process and product, art and audiences, teachers and students, engaging continually in a process of not-knowing, of looking for meaning

that is difficult in tension (Irwin, 2013). Thus, a/r/tography is particularly suited to researches whose aim is to grasp and interpret the latent dimensions of educational situations, triggering them through artistic action, understood in a non-instrumental sense, and through the non-subsidiary involvement of the actors. It avoids absolutist claims and remains open to the uncontrollable nature of what happens in any classroom – in Biesta’s words, to the “weakness” of education (Biesta, 2015).

“Walkthrough a/r/tography” as an act of public sociology

The walkthrough and the a/r/tography methods share a common point: they both begin by challenging something that is taken for granted. While the walkthrough approach questions the “neutrality” and objectivity of platforms, a/r/tography confronts itself with the traditional epistemological assumptions about research and knowledge production. Moreover, both techniques offer the opportunity to engage collectively with an object or issue of research, allowing for participatory and “open” research processes.

In this sense, to address one of the many digital platforms that populate contemporary educational spaces in a post-critical way (i.e., through affirmative forms of critique), we moved from the idea that by coupling these methods it would have been possible to create a workshop composed of one “dis-assembling” moment (the collective walkthrough) and of one “re-assembling” moment (the a/r/tography). As such, we imagined the coupling of these techniques as a way to: 1) confront oneself collectively with the materiality of the UNICA platform, i.e., its features and functions; 2) activate a creative collective process of reimagination of these features and functions.

Thus, the aim of this attempt at “creative public sociology” was to open up a space to critically engage with the UNICA platform and to reflect about how it guides users, shaping their educational experiences and practices. In other words, the idea was to collectively dis-assemble the vision incorporated in the UNICA platform and to understand its environment of expected use. In our case, the UNICA platform configures three types of users: students, teachers, and parents.

Therefore, to (re)take awareness of the platform, as non-neutral, and likewise to dis-assemble it for a public act of technological re-appropriation, three focuses, i.e. three research questions, were proposed to the workshop participants:

- What is the ideal student/teachers/parents proposed by UNICA?
- Through which expected practices is this idea proposed?
- Through what types of tools, languages, interface features are this vision and this idea of student defined by the platform?

Once these dimensions of inquiry have been dis-assembled using the walkthrough method, through a/r/tography we focused on their reconstruction, in order to highlight the complementarity between the act of exposing and that of opposing (Biesta, 2015). To this aim, we chose to tap into Arts-Based Research methodologies as a repertoire to complete the critical work we took on through the walkthrough with an affirmative one which is, as a matter of fact, an inherent, albeit often overlooked, facet of critique.

After the “dis-assembling” moment, we relied on the method of a/r/tography to open a space for collective and participatory reimagination of the UNICA platform. In particular, based on the previous recognition of ideal types (educational subjects) conceived by UNICA, the use of a/r/tography aimed to re-assemble the interface’s languages, tools and features, as well the personas of students/parents/teachers it proposes. As we will see through the next paragraphs, in practice, this happened by artistically imagining and generating a new platform interface by using the “collage” method. In this process, we were influenced by Eco’s (1971) notion of “Opera Aperta”: an object, produced by one or more authors, capable of organising a fabric of communicative effects that can be received and further expanded by the public. In this sense, the artworks are conceived to manifest a richness of facets and resonances without ever ceasing to be itself.

In order to familiarise the participants with the methodologies used, we packaged and presented them as the rules of a game. Hence, we have translated the four dimensions of the walkthrough (composition of the user interface, tone of voice and textual context, symbolic representation, and functions, tools and features) into a game board. In addition to that we have arranged a set of “unexpected event” cards to reduce the risk of flattening the participants’ considerations into a predetermined assortment of fixed dimensions. The same playful attitude was then used for the collage making exercise, during which the participants had the chance to craft their own game boards.

Far from being an institutionalised method, the combined and playful use of these techniques has been deployed as an “experiment” to investigate new ways of coupling affirmative critique with forms of public sociology. Through the next paragraph, we will see how this “experiment” unfolded in practice. In this, we will try to expose the practical implications of the workshop’s organisation and implementation, as well as discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

Re-inventing educational guidance: the walkthrough a/r/tography of the Platform UNICA

As anticipated in the introduction, during the second edition of the *Reclaim the Tech* (RTT) Festival, held in Bologna in May 2024, L@B-ED organised a workshop titled *School and critical approaches to digital platforms*. The context of the RTT Festival was very favourable for this experimental exercise in public sociology: born out of a bottom-up process fuelled by a community of activists, the festival brings together many marginalised knowledges about digital means and the digitalisation of society. RTT thus seemed to offer the perfect stage to ignite a common reflexive process about technologies, their social and educational impact, the influence of tech companies in shaping our institutional arrangements in education, and the complex ethical questions these issues raise regarding educational inequalities and data privacy. Furthermore, the ethical global approach of this festival resonated strongly with L@B-ED's theoretical orientation towards affirmative critique. Rather than rejecting digital tools outright, the festival advocates for their more thoughtful and intentional use to build a more inclusive and equitable society, reclaiming digitalisation as a tool to promote social, ecological, and gender justice.

The 'School and critical approaches to digital platforms' workshop was thus planned to gather school stakeholders (such as school managers, teachers, union representatives, and even students), educational digital experts (such as designers, DPOs, and innovators), as well as members of the broader public. The objective was to perform an exercise of affirmative critique, in order to collectively problematize the pervasive and often subtle effects of digital platform on the current forms of schooling; and to reimagine together alternative approaches to the digitalization of school education. More specifically, we wanted to test our methodology combining walkthrough and a/r/tography towards a twofold aim: to dis-assemble the UNICA platform, and to re-assemble it by attuning it to different educational sensitivities and alternative ideas about learning and learning personas.

Once the 12 participants were present – and after a brief outline of the workshop, including its aims and methodology (framed as the rules of the game) – a very concise presentation of the UNICA platform was delivered.

After the platform presentation, the roleplay started. The first passage was that of the walkthrough. The workshop participants (from now on: players) were required to familiarise themselves with the UNICA platform for an adequate amount of time by navigating it on their mobile devices. They were then invited to choose a role for the next phase: 'Do you want to be a teacher, a parent or a student?'. The key recommendation was to select a role that was

different from their real-life position; for instance, parents were encouraged to play as either teachers or students. Based on this role choice, the players were grouped into three different teams (each sitting around a separate worktable) and furnished with game materials, including a game board, a set of “unexpected event” cards (as is often the case with role-playing games), and some instructions to help them during the navigation. Players were also provided with various materials and resources specifically related to the platform, including a list of links to video tutorials and screenshots of the e-portfolio, which represents the key tool of UNICA and is accessible by logging in only to teachers, students, parents and technical-administrative school staff.

Each team was first tasked with surfing the UNICA platform from the point of view of the role they assumed (teacher, parent, or student), marking down some crucial aspects of their navigational experience. The dimensions along which their experience have been dis-assembled were drawn from the walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) methodological frame: Composition of the user interface, Tone of voice and textual context, Symbolic representation, and Functions, tools and features. These dimensions served as prompts for collective discussion and “data gathering”, encouraging each team to synthesise and re-elaborate their experience on the platform, thus articulating and guiding the fabrication of a shared characterisation of the user that the UNICA platform aims to produce. In this way, we tried to facilitate the analytical and reflexive processes working as a group of six mediators, two per team. We walked together with the players, soliciting their analysis and their thoughts, answering their questions, and clarifying the “rules of the game” with the discretion needed by our merely supportive function. Each team was then invited to share and discuss collectively the remarks that emerged from their respective walkthroughs.

In the next phase, based on the a/r/tography methodology (Leavy, 2020), the teams were invited to engage in the reimagination of possible alternative visions of educational guidance through the collage technique. They were provided with white poster boards, a set of stationery items, magazine and newspaper clippings, and screenshots of UNICA. Starting from the ideal users assumed by the platform, the players – now turned into “artists” – were asked to use the collage medium to *re-construct* the tools, tone and features of the platform interface, with the aim of reimagining the three categories of users – students, parents, teachers – that the platform is designed to address. The use of collage as a method allowed the participants to move beyond critique and actively engage in the creation of new possibilities. They were asked to present their final “masterpieces”, a term that we used deliberately and with a touch of irony, echoing the language used by UNICA, where it is

deployed to refer to students' projects uploaded to the platform as most representative of their progress and skills. A/r/tography practice thus facilitated a critical re-appropriation of digital technology, allowing an interesting role-reversal: by inviting participants to imagine new interfaces of the platform (i.e., a new homepage or e-portfolio), they had to abandon their user-role, turning into designers of their UNICA platform. Real needs, expectations, and frustrations with the current platform emerged to the surface. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the creative phase was developed by the three teams autonomously, without any involvement or mediation by researchers.

At the end of the collage-making process, the groups' various masterpieces were exhibited hanging on a wall of the TPO (the festival location) main hall, where they were left for the rest of the festival as a set of *opere aperte* (Eco, 1971) along with some pencils, markers, scissors and other equipment apt to modify them, as to leave the debate open to other suggestions. While this aspiration emerged from a specific epistemological position and was realized only to a certain extent – something we will further explore in future experiments – the walkthrough, collective discussion, and collage-making each generated some intriguing insights respectively yielded some interesting insights.

The data collected through the analysis of the observations made by the three groups during the walkthrough phase and the collective discussion revealed widespread criticism towards the platform under investigation. Specifically, the team who decided to play the parent's role remarked that UNICA requires a high level of digital literacy by parents, as well as a full knowledge of Italian and English, the only two languages in which the platform's contents are currently available. The platform proposes a hyper-performative model of education, inducing parents to constantly monitor and evaluate their child's progress, thus somehow delegitimizing the role of the teacher, and inciting comparison and competition among students. Moreover, the team complained about the compartmentalisation of competencies as suggested by the platform, as well as about the lack of attention for students with disabilities. Despite the apparently reassuring, simplifying and empowering tone, UNICA seems to not be easily accessible and inclusive from different points of view. Indeed, the new platform proposed by this team through the a/r/tography reclaims a more inclusive school, aimed at enhancing the talents and expectations of all students, promoting multifaceted and hybrid growth, where the experiences and competencies of the students valorised are not limited to school. Parents are seen as people who have to be supported in the use of the platform but also

as a support for the student within the educational community – implying a kind of co-responsibility pact.

The team that assumed the students' role strongly criticised the vision of guidance underlying the platform, considered schematic, computational and dehumanising. Students do not seem to be at the centre of the growth path whereas the importance of certificates is significantly emphasised. In this perspective, UNICA was found to be more work-oriented than school-oriented: the student is seen as a “producer of certificates” or a worker who must strive for excellence. The group stressed also that the platform operates with an extractivist logic: students are required to provide a lot of information and data but in return, they only receive mere guidance on how to improve the skills they have already acquired. Also, this team confirmed that the language used by the platform is very technical. The poster realised by this team, in fact, advocates for a more humanised platform and education, inviting in large letters to cheer for young people, linking sarcastically growth perspectives with outputs and guidance for students with entrepreneurship.

The team which took on the teacher's role shared the view that the platform appears primarily designed to steer students toward the labour market. Since the student's growth path is bound to predetermined categories, the function of the teacher is reduced to monitoring and evaluation, like a kind of “enforcer” or mere executor within an already defined system. The team also pointed out inconsistencies between the platform's visual and textual elements, noting that images sometimes contradicted the accompanying text, while the interface itself felt indirect and confusing. As far as the tone is concerned, it was defined as polite and assertive with requests formulated as instructions. A strong criticism towards the Government also emerged, where the group observed that the platform was developed more to seize the economic opportunities offered by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan funds rather than putting students' educational guidance at the centre of the process. The output of the a/r/tography realised by the team clearly highlights this criticality («so many billions, so few rules and no good ideas»), as well as the passive role of the teacher.

Insights from the walkthrough a/r/tography

The workshop yielded several relevant insights. The first significant lesson to be learned regards the diversity in modes of expression and affective responses observed during the collective presentations. Each group engaged with the exercise differently, producing a range of outputs that

reflect distinct affective regimes (Dernikos et al., 2020). Some players responded with a sarcastic or satirical tone, while others adopted an ethical-political or more descriptive approach. Working on and with digital platforms thus seems to be as much about feeling and emotion than it is about cognition; we have sought to give voice to this plurality of emotions and experiences rather than measure or compare them.

Another observation concerns the immediacy and speed with which digital platforms are typically consumed which were found to have profound implicit effects that often bypass conscious cognitive elaboration (Webb, Sellar & Gulson, 2020). However, when players were provided with tools to rationalise their initial experiences, this fast, affective engagement was transformed into a slower, more reflexive process. The role-playing game itself acted as a catalyst for this critical detachment, enabling players to step back from the platform and develop a more autonomous and critical stance toward its functionalities (also by “obliging” them to distance themselves from their real-life role).

A further reflection is about the relationship between participants, facilitators and their mutual engagement with the methodology. While we aimed to support the process without imposing our interpretations, the language used in the facilitation process remained somewhat esoteric and inaccessible to non-experts. For instance, the categories of the walkthrough-game board were sometimes misunderstood, pointing to a persistent challenge in bridging the gap between academic discourse and public engagement. This led to a twofold consideration: on the one hand the chance to come back on the material resources, e.g. clarifying and simplifying the categories of the analytic grid; and on the other the meaningfulness of the facilitators’ presence and work in a public sociology perspective.

A fourth point is the complexity of the role-playing exercise, particularly for adult players. Many found it challenging to embody the perspective of younger users when navigating the platform. This suggests that, while role-play can be a powerful tool for fostering empathy and critical reflection on digital means (Albrecht et al., 2019), it also exposes generational gaps in the digital experience, complicating the process of identification with unfamiliar user roles.

Finally, even though the players were already attuned – sometimes even in a passionate or activist manner – to the relationship between politics and technology, the workshop emphasised the inherently performative and political character of digital means. This collective awareness among participants indicates that future iterations of the project could further enrich this understanding across different social contexts.

Conclusion

Our experiment in the *public sociology of educational technology* has been an attempt to develop a way of engaging collectively with digital platforms and make them a collective *matter of concern*. Through the combination of the walkthrough method and a/r/tography, here, a public platform is problematized: it is no longer considered a *matter of fact*, something to be accepted as taken for granted, and become something to discuss, dis-assemble and re-assemble. They cease to be an inert means and indisputable background and start to be considered in their capacity to act and shape the conduct of the users. The experiment involves potential users in a collective exercise that raises awareness and reflexivity of its workings. Further experiments with other audiences will help to refine its features and make it a useful tool to be generalised in other settings. There is a need to test the methodology with other public to make it more scalable and generalizable. Nevertheless, the experiment describes the platform as a *composite thing* that can be dis-assembled and re-assembled. It opens a space where the platform is problematised and new reconfiguration possibilities are imagined.

These movements from the “digital” to the “paper” and the “digital” again reveal its underlying logic. It is mainly designed to strengthen the link between school and the labour market, making the educational dimension peripheral or subsumed by the expectations and the underlying goals of digital capitalism. Student profiles are at the centre stage, so that students are mostly seen as “producers of certificates”, as “bearers of competencies” to be accumulated; teachers are considered as tutors that accompany students in compliance to the mechanisms of guidance towards the market, and parents are meant to be managers of student performances. The experiment displays how profiles are only a person’s proxies; “digital doubles” that enhance their values as long as they accumulate certificates in a pre-defined list of competencies that are the curriculum of the digital economy. They reset the bodies, the complexities of the individuals, and the social contexts. Each profile tends to configure the student as “homo oeconomicus”, putting aside failures, disabilities, ethnic backgrounds, social classes, and collectivities. Social inequalities are reduced to individual differences in efforts and abilities.

In that experiment, the complex machinery of the neo-liberal regime is revealed through exercise of epistemic justice mobilising other circuits of knowledge in an aesthetic and ironic re-appropriation of the public platform. In this collective work there is complicity between participants and researchers, so that participants become co-researchers and lately a co-

designers opening to alternative possibilities or distance with respect to the object of investigation. Here, the making of the sociology of digital education platform is not marked by the asymmetry between the researcher and the participant, and the closeness between them favours a process in which knowing, learning and redesigning are not sequentially articulated but intersected and emergent. That way, critique is exercised through a specific affective attunement that enacts a love for the world. It is not accompanied by distancing, suspicion, and resentment towards the platform. It is characterised by joy, care, and is oriented instead towards a re-appropriation and reconfiguration of its configuration that escapes both from the easy techno-utopianism and from the gloomy digital catastrophism. In so doing it does not limit to negative but promotes affirmative critique and “post-critiqueness” (Oliverio, 2020; Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2018).

Further iterations of the experiment will be carried out to refine and consolidate the collective work of research. The first exercise describes the need for an attentive dosage between methodological rigour and art-based knowledge sensitivities, that is the development of a complex apparatus of research and intervention to make an affirmative sociology of public digital platform a reality.

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The contribution of post-critical pedagogy in radicalization studies

by *Claudio Melacarne**

Abstract

What drives this article is a genuine and profound desire to understand how the post-critical perspective can offer readings that are more capable of grasping, understanding, and carefully treating the delicate phenomena of ‘radicalization’. This desire arises, as often happens, from a doubt. The doubt is whether the ‘critical’ dimension does not chain us within a dialectical reading without offering pedagogical escape routes, does not allow us to imagine practices for preventing radicalization phenomena that in turn configure themselves as polarizing, radical, and non-dialogical experiences.

In this article, the first move to understand the contribution of the post-critical perspective will be to start precisely from the critical perspective used as a reference framework within a field research experience. The final movement will be to understand more deeply whether we truly need a ‘post’ point of view, but especially whether and how this can offer a different reading of what prevention of violent radicalism phenomena is and how it can be rethought.

Keywords: emancipation; post-critical pedagogy; radicalization.

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Introduction

This article proposes to discuss what contribution the Post-Critical Pedagogy manifesto can offer in interpreting radicalization phenomena. In particular, we will reflect on how post-critical pedagogy can suggest the use of languages and research postures capable of orienting practices for preventing radicalization phenomena (Schmid, 2013) that lead to violence.

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This is not an article of purely theoretical interest; we attempt to follow the path of ‘translation’ (Gherardi, Lippi, 2000), namely that operation, the attempt to render an idea, a construct, or a hope into something tangible, instrumental, and, albeit reductive, to operationalize. It is that intelligent action of translating an idea into practice. For this reason, we will start by analyzing how the use of critical perspective on a concrete case generated in the research group a sort of critical incident. From this incident, as happens in the best occasions described by Festinger as cognitive dissonances, the post-critical perspective emerged as a further and different reading, expanding the adoptable postures for rereading the case and for rethinking some research practices sedimented within the community.

We chose to adopt in this article an organizational mode of discourse typical of pedagogy, praxis-theory-praxis (Striano, 2004), convinced that post-critical pedagogy could convincingly suggest innovative growth insights even to practitioners. We have sought to start from praxis to return to it renewed, a movement that as thus formulated could already hide some form of post-critical attitude, as an outcome of love for the thing, of thing-centredness (Oliverio, 2020).

In particular, the idea embraced in this proposal is to see how the construct of “radicalization” (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2023; Sabic El Rayess & Marsick, 2021) is often defined as external and outside an educational framework, thus losing along the way a fundamental question about the principles that orient radical thinking, whether there exists an education to and about radical thinking, but especially how to read radical thinking and with what discrimination criteria. What appears promising to us in a post-critical perspective is the challenge of reconnecting with radical thinking, with the positivity or negativity of the principles that can nourish it, considering these phenomena as expressions of a world that must not only be “corrected” or “punished,” nor that must be unveiled (critical pedagogy) (Latour, 2004). In the manifesto developed by Hodgson, Vlieghe, Zamojski (2020), the positions of scholars interested in launching the post-critical challenge appear clear: transition from procedural normativity to a principle-based normativity (there are principles to defend!); affirmation of a pedagogical hermeneutics (the construction of a relational space is a possibility to be built, neither an “a priori” nor a principle distant from the here and now); affirmation of a pedagogy “beyond critique.”

How these suggestions can generate new readings is the task we have set ourselves to pursue within the framework of radicalization studies and possible prevention practices. In the first part of the article, an experience in which critical pedagogy was assumed as a reference framework will be illustrated. In the second part, the post-critical perspective will be

introduced in order to highlight possible potentialities and implications also in the educational field, for example in the development of emancipatory educational practices. Finally, some reflections that could be useful for exiting, when and if necessary, from the comfortable zone of critical theories.

What is radicalization?

The term “radicalization” derives from Latin “*radicalis*” (*root*), initially employed as a botanical metaphor to describe processes that reach fundamental causes. The term “*radicalization*” has thus been one of the terms that more than others has launched a fashion born in the last decade, that of categorizing any clear, defined, sharp position as radical, as intransigent, as negative (Neumann and Kleinmann, 2013). It is evident from the literature that a universally accepted definition is completely absent both in academic and institutional contexts (Neumann and Kleinmann, 2013). An example is these two positions, that of Kruglanski according to whom radicalization is the state of thought that drives individuals to undertake violent actions (Kruglanski, & al., 2013), and that of Neumann and Kleinmann (2013) who, from a literature review, reveal a broad use of the term “radicalization” in relation to polarized rather than violent belief systems (Bramadat, & Dawson, 2014; Balzacq & Settoul, 2020). This is one of many possible examples, in this case exploded into two binomials: radicalization = violence or radicalization = polarization.

We could continue, for example with Doosje et al. (2016) who define radicalization as a process of increasing commitment to the use of violent means, while Della Porta (2018) describes it as an escalation from non-violent action repertoires to violent action repertoires. For Mandel “at the most elementary level, radicalization can be defined as the process by which people become extremists” (Mandel, 2009, p. 111).

Some interesting convergence points are however sedimented in the literature. We identify a few. There is agreement on the idea that radicalization manifests itself as a gradual process, rather than as a sudden change (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013). These studies “differ in terms of length and complexity, but all subscribe to the idea that ‘becoming extremists’ is a process and that studying radicalization means discovering the nature of such a process” (Neumann, 2013, p. 874). Not only are we not born radicalized, but we do not improvise being radicalized, we do not pass from an off state to an on state, it is a gradual and social learning process (Melacarne, Caramellino & Ducol, 2022).

A further aspect on which many studies converge is related to the establishment of awareness that none of the widely used radicalization models and theories suggests that beliefs or ideologies are the only influence or explanation for why people develop violent behaviors (Neumann, 2013, p. 880). Radicalization is a multifactorial phenomenon. The variety of tools developed to measure its growth, or stages of development, bears witness to this. Whether it is Moghadam's "ladder" model, McCauley and Moskaleiko's "pyramid" approach, or Baran's "conveyor belt" theory, they all share the vision that it is a complex journey, growing through multiple phases, influenced by various elements and forces over time. Finally, a broad corpus of studies maintains that not all cognitive extremisms lead to violence, radicalization is therefore a posture toward a challenge, a problem, a phenomenon, or a perspective on the world, whose ends determine its value (can one be radical for a 'good' end?). In this reading, radicalization is not only a vision that a person adopts to make sense of a phenomenon, it is a way of inhabiting and living that phenomenon.

Ultimately, a balanced definition seems to us to be that expressed by Maskaliūnaitė who describes radicalization as the gradual adoption of increasingly restrictive ideas that emphasize individual cognitive and ideological transformation at a level that can finally manifest extremist and violent behaviors and actions (Maskaliūnaitė, 2015).

First attempt. Education for critical thinking against the emergence of radical thinking

Let us return from the definition assumed as the center of gravity of the argumentation. Radicalization is the gradual adoption of increasingly restrictive ideas that emphasize individual cognitive and ideological transformation at a level that can finally manifest extremist and violent behaviors and actions (Maskaliūnaitė, 2015).

As pedagogists, we have strongly fought the idea of supporting simplifying forms of thought that could in some way suggest solutions and violent actions aimed at affirming an idea or imposing a practice. With this spirit, as a research group, we used transformative learning theory some years ago to try to interpret radicalization phenomena and attempt to design educational practices for preventing these phenomena (Mezirow, 1991; Fabbri & Melacarne, 2023). Examined through this lens, radicalization is an individual or collective process that manifests as precritical thinking, which can generate distorted ideological hypotheses and polarized

perspectives, potentially reflected in varied but stereotyped actions and behaviors (Melacarne and Fabbri, 2023). Transformative learning theory allowed us to shed new light on the investigation of radicalization processes following two paths. As an interpretive framework, it allowed us to describe radicalization as a sociopsychological phenomenon that derives from formal and informal learning experiences in ordinary living spaces (Fabbri & Amiraux, 2020). As a methodological framework, it offered us the epistemological and methodological basis for investigating radicalization processes based on reflection informed by the distorted cultural assumptions that we as white European researchers have internalized. It has in this sense allowed us to become critical-reflective researchers or at least we have tried.

In both cases, transformative learning theory suggests moving within the realm of critical pedagogy, as if it were the integrative background that together with other theories and philosophies of education provides the directional sense of more micro and partial perspectives. As researchers, we adopted the paradigm we considered the most complete: the tradition of transformative learning research (Mezirow, 2003; Marsick & Neaman, 2018) and the tradition of critical pedagogy (Morley, Ablett, Noble & Cowden, 2020). These two branches were the most familiar terrain for us and were readily translated into methodological investigation protocols.

These studies allowed us to see in radicalization what we considered distorted perspectives and thus develop a more critical vision of research and analysis. Our starting point was the perspective that had given us security and academic recognition: the critical perspective applied to adult learning (Mezirow, 1991; 2003) and, in particular, those studies through which we had sought to deconstruct the discussion on radicalization. Theoretical perspectives based on “critique” consider critical thinking as an explanatory mechanism that reveals the epistemological assumptions hidden behind the surface of phenomena, in our case educational phenomena (Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1987; Holst & Brookfield, 2017).

Within transformative learning theory, the construct of radicalization constitutes the heterogeneous expression of a mode of precritical thinking that can generate distorted assumptions and violent action schemes (Mezirow, 1991; Fabbri, & Melacarne, 2023). This is learned in contexts of captivity and cultural interactions through failed contact experiences, frustrating material life paths, betrayed expectations, belonging needs not supported by various host communities. Transformative theory offers a cognitive interpretive key to explain the different levels of thought development, unveiling both how we learn and how learning can be a trajectory of change. The assumptions from which this reading moves are

the most classic of the *critical* tradition: according to this approach, precritical thinking is the phase of our thinking in which the categories with which we read the world are taken for granted and certain, ontologically true and not perceived as historically generated. There is a need for someone to unveil the fallacy of these theories and positions.

In the context of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2003), radicalization represents the cognitive inability to participate in a dialectical discussion or to address a problem in critical-reflective terms (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2020). This translates into the epistemic posture of having to adopt a criterion external to the educational processes in place to establish whether the radicalization process is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, for example if we refer to radical pacifist thinking or to racist theories. It also translates into the difficulty of truly and effectively suspending judgment since the researcher, the educator even more so, cannot abandon the chair of the one who must dust off that particle of experience in which a distortion nests.

It was a good “first step,” but we understood how difficult it was to understand the phenomena that lead to radicalization using the lens of transformative learning. Transformative learning is usually defined as the processes through which we critically examine and transform taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, capable of change and reflective so that they generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow & Associates, 2012, p. 76).

These statements, tested through comparison with research experience, existing literature, and initial results derived from interviews, began to waver, together with the conviction that through the transformation of meaning perspectives it would be possible to hope to induce more self-directed learning, permeable to other points of view and therefore less radicalized thinking. We found what had already been widely discussed and explored in the literature, namely the difficulty of fighting with the same blunt weapons: the impermeability of radical thinking as an experience based on the same postulates posited by the critical approach.

We understood how the application of critical analysis clashed with phenomena that were to some extent guided by the same epistemic perspective (critical): the application of critique to the world or to a phenomenon by radicalized people followed the same process as non-radicalized people attempting to deconstruct radical thinking.

Radical thinking is a ‘nasty beast’ because fighting it with criticism means often clashing with perspectives that consider distorted the assumptions that are adopted by the same critical-educational process,

engaged with all its forces to unveil a hidden truth, to highlight a distorted assumption and educate it in view of a socio-culturally defined principle.

The contribution of critical perspective for the research community

When we approached the theme of radicalization, we were not prepared. Our model of individual radicalization was deeply impregnated by the inflammatory propaganda discourse of the media on violence and terrorism. As researchers, the commitment to building a network of research and institutions that shared the common interest of investigating radicalization processes required us to analyze in depth our epistemological assumptions about normal microradicalization processes (Melacarne, Caramellino & Ducol, 2022) that occur in informal living spaces. We did this through exchange with international researchers who were carrying out projects on xenophobic ideology, educational displacement, and deradicalization paths (Fabbri & Romano, 2021).

We had to recognize that at the beginning of the project we were not prepared and that our epistemological distortions had automatically associated radicalization processes with social groups considered representative of Otherness, such as foreigners, migrants, marginalized people, and second and third-generation foreign refugees (Fabbri & Romano, 2021).

The contribution of transformative learning theory helped us to review and question our taken-for-granted premises about radicalization processes: as a team of co-researchers, how could we de-radicalize and untangle our opinions about radicalization processes? Who were the radicalized people for us? How could we access the ambiguity and complexity produced by the challenge of making reductive choices when investigating complex phenomena?

Once again, the framework offered by transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) provided a specific conceptual anchor for reflecting on our positioning as researchers. The notion of “myside bias” (Southworth, 2022) was particularly useful for analyzing our internal assumptions about the topic. Addressing the challenges of managing ambiguous research, indeed, confronted us, as a research team, with at least two processes that are considered favorable to perspective transformations:

1. being aware of and countering biases and cognitive dissonances that force us, as researchers, to remain bound to habitual thinking models;

2. facilitating perspective-taking as a condition for validating our prior knowledge (Southworth, 2022).

As researchers, we were protected from the influence of our natural inclination to frame issues, problems, and dilemmas in a way that resonated with our previous beliefs and epistemological assumptions regarding *radicalization and its processes*. In our research journey, we were forced to “disturb” our *dark side*, our cognitive and epistemological biases, particularly related to the idea of multiethnicity, culture, gender, and politics. Our research was permeated by autochthonous epistemologies (Southworth, 2022; Romano, 2023). As Brookfield notes, it is almost “impossible to become aware of our interpretive filters using those same interpretive filters” (Holst & Brookfield, 2017, p. 61). None of us had reflected on our implicit internalized Islamophobia, nor on how we had developed the construct of whiteness and race in our historically colonizing country (Fabbri, 2024).

To some extent we were prisoners trapped in the frames we use to attribute meaning to our experience. Exiting familiar perspectives meant temporarily suspending all cognitive automatisms that informed our interpretation of all routine scripts that guided us in making sense of radicalization processes without considering our radicalized perspective on critical thinking and rationality. Critical thinking and reflective theory were not sufficient to explain radicalization processes. We had to practice “radical openness” (Hooks, 2010, p. 10) to embrace post-critical scientific perspectives.

Toward a post-critical reading of radicalization

Surpassing traditional dichotomies between security-focused approaches and educational approaches, post-critical pedagogy could offer new perspectives for rereading both the phenomenon of radicalization and for attempting to redesign prevention practices. Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski (2017) have revolutionized this field by introducing the fundamental principles of post-critical pedagogy. These include principle-based normativity, which emphasizes fundamental principles rather than procedural standards; pedagogical hermeneutics, which creates spaces of mutual understanding rather than limiting itself to interpreting others; post-critical orientation, which presupposes equality and transformative potential while protecting educational experiences; present-focused hope, which embraces current possibilities rather than distant ideals; and love for

the world, which values the intrinsic worth of education over instrumental objectives. This framework represents a significant shift from traditional critical pedagogy. It emphasizes an affirmative perspective that recognizes the value of the world while acknowledging the need for change. Unlike conventional approaches that treat relationships as given, post-critical pedagogy considers them as achievements that require active construction and maintenance.

The implications for addressing radicalization are profound. Instead of attempting to deconstruct or eliminate radical thinking, post-critical pedagogy suggests holding together conflicting elements, seeking healing and potential rather than correction. This approach raises fundamental questions about respect and dialogue, particularly about how conventional notions of respect can paradoxically hinder authentic communication. The three main innovations of post-critical pedagogy offer crucial insights into complex radicalization processes. By recognizing the educational potential of radical thinking, this approach acknowledges that radicalization often begins with legitimate questions about social justice, identity, and meaning. People may turn to radical ideologies not for intrinsic destructiveness, but for a genuine desire to understand and improve their world, for love of 'things', understood as hopes (Oliverio, 2020). This perspective helps us recognize that radical thinking can emerge from positive impulses such as the search for truth, justice, or community, even if these impulses are later distorted, or are not aligned with social expectations. Understanding the educational potential of radical thinking reveals how the development of radical perspectives is often intertwined with learning processes. Individuals may adopt radical positions through intense engagement with social issues, historical studies, or philosophical questioning. Their path toward radicalization often involves sophisticated meaning-making processes, critical analysis of social structures, and deep involvement in complex visions. By recognizing this educational dimension, we can better understand how intelligent and reflective people can develop extreme positions through their search for knowledge and desire to understand and leave a 'positive' mark on the world.

The promotion of dialogue without predetermined outcomes represents another crucial insight that could emerge from adopting a post-critical perspective on radicalization processes. Traditional approaches often fail because they start from fixed assumptions about what constitutes "correct" thinking, an undistorted perspective, an 'acceptable' vision. This predetermination can alienate individuals who feel that their perspectives are ignored before being truly heard. The post-critical approach suggests that authentic dialogue, in which outcomes remain open and multiple

viewpoints can coexist, better addresses the psychological and social dynamics that contribute to radicalization. This emphasis on open dialogue helps us understand how the lack of spaces for authentic exchange can fuel radicalization. When individuals feel that their concerns or perspectives cannot be expressed within dominant discourse, they may seek more extreme places of expression. The post-critical approach suggests that creating spaces where different viewpoints can be explored without immediate judgment could prevent the isolation and polarization that often fuel radicalization. The shift to disengagement rather than complete ideological transformation offers practical insights into how radicalization operates and how it might be addressed. This approach recognizes that beliefs and behaviors, while interconnected, are not inseparable. Someone might have radical opinions but choose non-violent ways to express them. By focusing on behavioral change rather than thought reform, this perspective helps us understand how individuals can maintain strong convictions while finding more constructive ways to act on them. This attention to disengagement also illuminates how radicalization often intensifies when individuals feel that their core beliefs are under attack. Attempts to forcibly change someone's fundamental beliefs often backfire, reinforcing their commitment to radical positions. Understanding this dynamic helps explain why conventional deradicalization programs, which often aim for complete ideological transformation, can prove counterproductive. Furthermore, the post-critical perspective helps us understand radicalization as a complex interaction between individual action and social context. Rather than considering it a purely individual choice or social determination, this approach reveals how personal experiences, social conditions, and educational opportunities intersect in the development of radical perspectives. It suggests that addressing radicalization requires attention to both individual meaning-making processes and broader social contexts. This framework also helps explain why some individuals radicalize while others, in similar circumstances, do not. By recognizing the role of individual agency and meaning-making in radicalization processes, we can better understand how personal factors interact with social conditions to influence outcomes. This understanding suggests that prevention efforts should focus on supporting individual meaning-making processes while creating social conditions that encourage constructive, rather than destructive, expressions of radical thinking. The post-critical approach thus offers a more nuanced and effective framework for understanding and addressing radicalization. It invites us to think that preventing violent radicalization requires not only a commitment to countering extreme ideologies, but also that of creating spaces where

individuals can explore complex ideas, express strong convictions and engage in meaningful dialogue, while finding non-violent ways to pursue social change. In other words, what are the spaces within which we can give value to ‘things’, to those things that make us so engaged as to lead us to adopt radical thinking and, provocatively, push us to want to transmit and pass on the ‘thing’ of this radicality to others, to young people, to posterity. This challenge ably described by Oliverio (2020) through the reading of Serres (1992), can be crystallized in the title *From Panoptic Theory and ‘Critiquiness’ to Pedagogical Thing-Centredness and Educational Love* (Oliverio, 2020, p. 2). It is an uncomfortable perspective, because it actually invites us to see and stay within the diversity of perspectives, to respect them and take them for their immanent value.

The practical implications of this shift are significant. Traditional approaches to deradicalization often aim for complete ideological transformation, considering radical thinking fundamentally flawed. In contrast, post-critical pedagogy suggests examining what might be valuable in radical perspectives, while working to prevent harmful manifestations. This approach is particularly relevant in multicultural educational contexts, where fear of offense can create barriers to authentic dialogue. By redefining respect as active engagement rather than passive reverence, educators can create more authentic spaces for exchange and understanding. The post-critical perspective suggests that preventing violent radicalization does not necessarily require the complete elimination of radical thinking. Rather, it proposes the creation of educational spaces where different perspectives can be safely explored and where transformation occurs through engagement rather than confrontation. This represents a radical departure from traditional prevention strategies. Rather than focusing exclusively on security or behavioral modification, it emphasizes understanding, dialogue, and the potential for positive change within radical thinking itself. This nuanced approach can offer more effective ways to address radicalization, respecting individual autonomy and promoting authentic educational relationships. The success of the methodology lies in its ability to maintain tension between recognizing the legitimate concerns of radical thinking and preventing violent expressions. By focusing on disengagement rather than deradicalization, it offers practical solutions for reducing harm while respecting intellectual freedom and promoting deeper understanding. This innovative approach opens new possibilities for addressing radicalization in educational contexts, suggesting that effective prevention might derive from engagement and understanding, rather than confrontation and correction. It offers a

promising path in the complex challenge of addressing radicalization while maintaining both educational integrity and respect for human dignity.

Post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2020) suggests the use of languages and research attitudes capable of orienting radicalization prevention practices beyond the dualism between a “security approach” and an “educational approach.” Inspired by the experience of the previous project and by the literature, it seemed interesting to us to recover constructs and perspectives that could go beyond a “classic” and widespread approach of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), in which the “critical” attitude places the researcher, educator and teacher in a position of power, “truth” and, in certain circumstances, judgment toward the world and experience (Oliverio, 2020).

Some of the activities carried out during the FORwARD project research process taught us that the adoption of radical thinking, sometimes the development of radicalized practices, must be understood in light of how they manifest themselves. We tried to deconstruct the assumptions of many professionals or people who expressed radical positions and tested the difficulty of placing ourselves in a non-judgmental perspective. We experienced the powerlessness of staging arguments and discussions guided by a critical perspective, only to receive equally constructed responses with the same logic from our interlocutors. As much as we tried to deconstruct others’ positions, others tried to highlight our distorted assumptions.

Post-critical pedagogy proposes itself as an affirmative perspective founded on love of the world (Arendt, 2006), which recognizes the importance of critique, which focuses on care and conservation of positive elements of education, which emphasizes the present rather than the future and the intrinsic value of education itself. *The Manifesto* (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2016) expands a vision often taken for granted in educational contexts, namely the one that considers the “relationship” as a priori, so that critical pedagogy invites us to deconstruct and understand the genesis and distortions generated within a relationship that has manifested, concluded and then stabilized.

The construction of a relational space is a possibility on which it is necessary to commit and work, it is a new condition of discourse in which it is necessary to discover the generativity of object discussion in the *hic et nunc*. The relationship is neither an “a priori” nor a principle distant from practice, it is one of the objectives of practice itself.

Especially in radicalization processes or education for deradicalization or disengagement (Melacarne, Caramellino & Ducol, 2022) the post-critical perspective does not invite us to deconstruct but to hold together even the conflicting parts. It is the affirmation of a pedagogy “beyond critique”

because education should not undo but heal and see potentialities by opening education itself to questions about its meaning and the directionality of the process. The manifesto emphasizes some assumptions on which critical perspectives instead base their epistemic scaffolding. Critical pedagogy tends to legitimize a distributed relativism to lose the central question of which principles to defend, to pass on. All perspectives that lead to the development and adoption of radical perspectives make the guiding principles, the ends, their own very clear and explicit. On the contrary, the antidote, in a post-critical perspective, might not be the deconstruction of ends, but the discussion and reflection also on ends, on their value for the people who define them, which ones to pass on and why.

Post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) has raised a fundamental question regarding the adoption of pedagogical hermeneutics and its relationship with the concept of respect for the Other. The emerging paradox deserves in-depth analysis: how can respect, a founding element of pedagogical relationships, transform into an obstacle to authentic dialogue? The core of this question lies here in the problematic interpretation of respect as “reverential” distance in any type of educational relationship and connection.

This apparently virtuous approach risks crystallizing the Other in a dimension of untouchability, creating invisible but significant barriers to the process of exchange and mutual understanding. This criticality emerges particularly in multicultural educational contexts, where the fear of offending or invading others’ cultural spaces can become a form of dialogical paralysis. This phenomenon, paradoxically from an educational perspective, contrasts with the very principles of pedagogical hermeneutics, which finds its fundamental pillars in dialogue and interpretation. Mezirow emphasized rational discourse as a prerequisite for reaching social consensus on validated meaning. While Habermas (1971, 1984) proposed rational discourse as focused on the public sphere, Mezirow (1991) applied this concept to individuals acting on sets of personal and interpersonal assumptions.

The implications of post-critical pedagogy are significant for educational practices. Educators face the challenge of balancing authentic respect with the need for constructive confrontation. The challenge is not purely theoretical: it directly influences the quality of pedagogical relationships and the effectiveness of educational processes. The post-critical perspective suggests overcoming this impasse through a redefinition of the concept of *respect*. No longer understood as passive reverence, but as *active engagement with alterity* (Wortmann, 2019).

This concept develops in multiple directions. For example, educators must navigate between the risk of cultural relativism and the need to maintain authentic dialogue. Teacher training must be rethought to include

intercultural dialogue skills that go beyond mere formal respect. In conclusion, post-critical pedagogy invites us to reconsider the profound meaning of respect in education. The challenge consists in transforming “*respect-as-barrier*” into “*respect-as-bridge*”, capable of promoting authentic dialogue and deeper mutual understanding.

The conviction of “illuminating” a practice is based on the idea that only theory can transform it into something better, without recognizing any positive factor and potentially self-generating positive change. This is what these authors call belief in a hopeless utopia.

These reflections seem particularly interesting if used to reread some passages of the now consolidated debate that has sought to understand how people and communities, at certain historical moments or under certain socio-political conditions, develop radical forms of thought and action that can transform into radicalized or violent thoughts and behaviors (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2023). What seems promising to us in a post-critical perspective is the challenge to reconnect with radical thinking, with the positivity or negativity of the principles that nourish it, and to consider these phenomena not as expressions of a world that only needs to be “corrected” or “punished,” or deconstructed and parceled out to return to docile-radical, semi-radical, quasi-radical thinking.

The other question raised by post-critical pedagogy is the consideration of principles as a central variable in educational processes. Trust and hope in emerging phenomena (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) lead us to open ourselves to the study of radicalization phenomena that could imply hope for positive change.

Let us try to make some examples. A classic question might be the following: *what change is positive if it is supported by radical thinking?* Post-critical pedagogy offers such reformulation: *if radicalization is an emerging phenomenon, how can we build spaces where all voices can participate, affirming their own principles and taking responsibility for their own positioning, in the hope that this generates new meeting spaces?*

The impact of this reflection appears extremely fruitful if we imagine it as a theoretical framework within which to design actions for preventing radicalization phenomena that lead to violence. As already noted, we often oscillate between “security” approaches (error/punishment) and “corrective” approaches (error/invitation to adopt new attitudes). These two positions always place ‘radical’ thinking outside interaction, outside the dialectic of listening and hope, as a condition for building an educational ground not vitiated by ‘suspicion or conspiracy theory’. In the 2016 Manifesto (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017), the positions of scholars interested in launching the post-critical challenge seem clear: the transition from

procedural normativity to principle-based normativity (there are principles to defend!); the affirmation of a pedagogical hermeneutics (the construction of a relational space is a possibility to be built, neither an ‘a priori’ nor a principle distant from the here and now); the affirmation of a pedagogy ‘beyond critique’ (education should not reveal but heal and see possibilities, opening education itself to questions about its sense and direction).

The conceptualization of radicalization has been traditionally positioned outside pedagogical frameworks, with consequent significant theoretical and practical limitations in educational approaches. This externalization has created a notable gap in understanding the basic principles that guide radical thinking and its educational implications. As we have discussed, research has addressed radicalization predominantly from security-focused or sociological perspectives. Educational perspectives have been conspicuously absent from dominant discourse, with limited attention to pedagogical dimensions. Existing educational approaches to radical thinking have been largely reactive rather than proactive, focusing on prevention rather than understanding. Or, radicalization as a construct that must be deconstructed and dismantled to be evaluated and understood within standards. However, the most relevant question posed by the post-critical perspective is the following. Education that deals with “*de-radicalization*” or “*prevention*” is based on the idea that there is nothing to save in the processes that produce these phenomena. According to this vision, radicalization is opposed to education, and refers to the representation of something to be corrected, externalized, criticized to “fight.” However, the post-critical perspective would paradoxically invite us to have a more open perspective, to consider what is positive in the radical process, even if only in some of its forms.

A primary reflection concerns the question that post-critical pedagogy raises about the value of principles. It is a classic and interesting short circuit if thought in the context of the radicalization debate. Trust and hope in present and emerging phenomena (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) also push us to open ourselves to the study of radicalization phenomena that, while not manifesting as aligned with a normative or socially shared idea of “critical thinking,” incorporate *the hope for positive change*. The post-critical perspective reinterprets theories and methodologies for preventing radicalization processes within a more authentic and self-directed educational perspective, limiting the risks of subordinating these processes to critique as the only way to promote transformations (Melacarne & Fabbri, 2023). We emphasize the contribution of the post-critical perspective to the study of radicalization and radicalized thinking through three important epistemological shifts described here.

[i.] *The educational potential of radicalized thinking*

Some perspectives in the field of education and radicalization prevention have often sought to “correct” or “deradicalize” thinking deemed extreme. This ambitious objective has been pursued by attempting to re-educate radical thinking in a manner consistent with critical pedagogy. This implies identifying and addressing the distortions underlying interpretations considered erroneous, as well as deconstructing and decomposing experiences to identify underlying structures, latent needs, and implicit conditions that allow radicalized thinking to emerge and develop (Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

The actual and pragmatic impact of the post-critical contribution to radicalization studies remains to be discovered and clarified. However, it seems interesting to us to advance some interpretive hypotheses by formulating them as research questions. It is about changing the objective, namely preserving the positive elements of radical thinking.

Conventional approaches to deradicalization often aim for a high, elevated, and transformative objective, we could say: bringing radical thinking back to one more open to the relativity of perspectives. To an abstract conceptualization, radicalization and deradicalization are indeed mirror images of each other, and the mechanisms that promote deradicalization reverse those that favor radicalization (Kruglanski, et al., 2013). For example, this explanatory approach reduces radicalization and deradicalization to a binary epistemology, which raises a series of fundamental questions regarding the “myth” of radicalization as something separate from critical thinking.

A post-critical perspective suggests that people can have a generative experience of radical thinking and seek to identify and preserve the positive elements contained within it.

These positive elements are described much more precisely in the *Manifesto*. It is not about defining what they are, but about changing our “posture,” working on our “problem posing,” as researchers and, if we want, as educators. This passage from the critical to the post-critical approach is explained very well by the authors of the *Manifesto*, who argue:

Therefore, the pedagogue assumes the role of the one who is required to lift the veil; what he lifts the veil from, however, is a status quo on which they base external judgment. To formulate more positively the role of the pedagogue as initiator of the new generation into a common world, we offer the idea of a post-critical pedagogy, which requires love for the world. This is not an acceptance of how things are, but an affirmation of the value of what we do in the present and therefore of the things we appreciate as worthy of being transmitted. But not as they are: educational hope concerns the possibility of a renewal of our common

world. When we truly love the world, our world, we must be willing to transmit it to the new generation, starting from the assumption that they, the newcomers, can take it on, on their own terms (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 18).

This approach would recognize that radical thinking is not intrinsically negative and contains valid insights or legitimate concerns. Instead of seeking to completely eradicate such ideas, educators might focus on helping individuals to:

- a) identify the motivations underlying their radical thinking;
- b) distinguish between constructive and destructive elements within these ideas;
- c) and transmit the energy and passion associated with radical thinking in positive and constructive directions.

ii. "Dialogue for dialogue's sake"

This strategy could lead to a more open dialectic and deeper understanding, rather than simply suppressing ideas deemed problematic. Traditional critical pedagogy often approaches dialogue with a predetermined emancipatory agenda, never excessively explicit about which distortions are legitimate and which are not. An excellent reference for this point is offered by Eschenbacher and Marsick (2024): the two authors make a difference between the notion of rational discourse and the idea of transformative conversation. While in Mezirow's theory rational discourse was a fundamental step to review and examine our taken-for-granted meaning schemes, in Eschenbacher and Marsick's transformative conversations there is no need for consensus and there is room for emotional and spiritual non-cognitive processes that interfere with meaning-making processes (Eschenbacher & Marsick, 2024).

A post-critical perspective instead raises the creation of educational spaces where people can explore different viewpoints without the expectation of reaching specific emancipatory objectives (Oliverio, 2020). This approach could be called "dialogue for the sake of dialogue" and facilitates open discussion without judgment, encourages active listening and empathy for different perspectives, and promotes critical reflection on one's own beliefs and those of others. By creating these spaces that do not aim for emancipation at all costs, educators can promote deeper understanding and potential transformation that will emerge organically if conditions are in place, rather than being imposed from outside.

iii. Moving from deradicalization to disengagement

We propose a shift in focus from the objective of deradicalization to that of disengagement. Disengagement denotes the interruption of active participation in radicalized thinking and violence. This shift in perspective recognizes that, while it may be difficult or counterproductive to try to completely change a person's beliefs, it is possible to work to *disengage* them from enacting violent or destructive behaviors. We could focus on actions rather than beliefs, betraying in a certain sense our socio-constructivist convictions. Or we can try to help people find alternative and non-violent ways to express their concerns and pursue their objectives. By moving toward disengagement, educators can work to reduce the potential for violence and harm while respecting individuals' intellectual autonomy.

These three main turning points represent a significant departure from traditional radicalization prevention strategies. By adopting a post-critical perspective, educators can create more open and inclusive dialogue spaces, recognize the complexity of radical thinking, and focus on pragmatic outcomes rather than total ideological transformation. This post-critical reading offers a promising path toward a more nuanced and potentially more effective understanding of radicalization and its place in the educational landscape.

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^[1] "FORWARD - Formazione, Ricerca e Sviluppo di Strategie Community-Based per Facilitare e Supportare Pratiche di Convivialità in Contesti Multietnici" (ID MIUR: 85901). Il progetto FORWARD rientra nel mandato definito dalla commissione ministeriale: "costituire reti universitarie nell'attuazione di accordi di collaborazione tra le università italiane e quelle degli stati membri dell'Organizzazione per la Cooperazione Islamica".

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Educational Reflective Practices

Educational Reflective Practices nasce dall'esperienza maturata all'interno di un ampio network nazionale e internazionale composto da docenti universitari, consulenti e professionisti che da anni condividono e utilizzano un approccio riflessivo nello studio dei processi educativi e formativi.

La Rivista propone dunque saggi ed articoli sui temi della formazione e dello sviluppo del pensiero riflessivo nei contesti della vita e del lavoro, sui modelli e le logiche dell'agire educativo, sulle strategie formative per coltivare le comunità di pratiche e sostenere l'apprendimento organizzativo, sulle metodologie e gli strumenti per l'educazione del pensiero critico.

Due le tipologie dei contributi presenti: **ricerche empiriche** con preferenza per quelle che adottano un impianto qualitativo; **studi teorici** innovativi rispetto alla letteratura esistente, che privilegiano approcci multidisciplinari e piste di ricerca internazionali.

La Rivista si propone quindi come strumento di riflessione e aggiornamento per professionisti, esperti e ricercatori che lavorano in ambito educativo e formativo all'interno di organizzazioni pubbliche e/o private (università, istituzioni, scuole, organizzazioni del terzo settore, aziende).