Allgemeiner Teil

Discussing the Emperor’s New Clothes – the Metaphysics of Neoliberal Policy and Educational Conversation

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Abstract

Des Kaisers neue Kleider – die ‘Metaphysik’ neoliberaler Steuerung und das pädagogische Gespräch
Practical and Theoretical Inquiry in the Field of Pedagogics

In a pedagogical situation, one will observe that the pedagogue makes choices at every instant. One can call it »practical inquiry«, when pedagogues use theory more or less tacitly when justifying their practical suggestions. Practical inquiry accounts for the particularities of a specific state of affairs to deliberate a course of action. The specifics are grasped foremost by sensuality and intuition, as atmospheres, social relationships, options, etc. Beside this, practical reflexivity also involves the process of critically thinking about issues related to the specific context as well as to a state of affairs that encompasses one's practice as it is enacted. Here, different forms of disciplinary and socio-cultural knowledge, personal dispositions and comportments as well as learning conditions, such as differences in origins, age, gender, etc., come into play. Practical inquiry or thoughtfulness even involves dealing with character formation and artistry, inevitably even though moral choices. Max van Manen (1992) explains pedagogical thoughtfulness as tactfulness, following the aim of a best possible »fit between action and reaction – i.e., between impulse and response, indecision and assertiveness, decision and irrevocability, distance and proximity« (Kraus 2020, online). As the support and motivation of learners and educators to direct their personal agency towards learning is always facing threats of humiliation, practical inquiry within pedagogy is directed to hold up the »dignity of pedagogical practice«.

In short, practical inquiry or thoughtfulness involves intuition, responsiveness, and refers to theories. It is indispensable for the realization of education.
Practical inquiry or thoughtfulness forms the center of a teacher’s practice, aiming at creating an environment conducive to connection and discussion by engaging and exploring the students in conversation. In conversations, the students join practiced thoughtfulness. Interpersonal conversation is, thus, inherent to practical inquiry and thoughtfulness. The Greek θεωρία, corresponds to ›looking at‹, ›gazing at‹, ›being aware of‹. One can explicate theory as a carefully thought-out explanation for observations.

Theories on education explain the process qualities, interpretation, and purposes of learning and education. According to Joseph Schwab (2013), ›theoretic inquiry‹ is characterized by a distal relationship to the concrete situations and decisions that constitute the basis of practice. There are many forms of theoretic inquiry, like plans, laws, demands of objectivity following deductive logics and scientific approaches.

2 Educational Policies

In the fields of education, practical inquiry, thoughtfulness and theoretic inquiry are, today, widely determined by macro-level regulatory policies. There is widespread agreement that pedagogy consists of specific practices, while politics are highly involved in shaping pedagogy by putting up educational directives (curricula, governmental papers, etc.).

Educational policy work presumes a particular relationship to practice, typical of abstract theoretic forms of inquiry. Macro-level regulatory policies address particular states of mind to rationalize general, and even standardized guidelines for education (Tienken 2017). The text-form of the policy is not argumentative; the diction is universal, constitutional and statutory. At the same time, policies usually address a person by direct instructions on what to do. They, thus, belong to the text genre of orders. In an order how to relate theory to praxis is simply prescribed, hereby even presupposing that the stakeholders share a common understanding. Macro-level regulatory policies are extensively used to enforce ideological commitments and put them into practice (Malychev 2008).

In e.g. putting up laws, governmental leaders, e.g. politicians are enacting the system of thought in power. The central means of political accomplishment are symbolic power and ideology. Policies are created and upheld for made-up, hypothetical, palatable, amenable and practical purposes, rather than for deliberate, epistemic reasons. In their mostly ›down to business language ductus‹, any activity other than imposing demands upon others is for the most part only pretense. Engaged in abstract theoretic rather than practical
forms of inquiry, those who are conceptualizing laws and regulatory policies (such as governmental leaders, e.g. politicians, or others) usually do not themselves act in the sense of practical inquiry in the fields of concern. Professional practitioners are moreover needed to operationalize the plans. Governmental leadership for the most part »strolls around« in the discursive systems, which are made up of the ruling power structures (Foucault 1972).

Let us give an example of an educational policy that demands accountability: For instance, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC 2020), which is an influential professional organization in the United States, explicitly tells us that »the curriculum helps young children achieve goals that are meaningful because they are culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally and educationally significant.« (ibid., p. 25)

In this policy text, the notions of how »the curriculum helps young children«, as well as the terms of »meaningful«, »culturally and linguistically responsive« and »developmentally and educationally significant« are not explained. Who decides what constitutes »culturally and linguistically responsive goals«, or whether a curriculum is »meaningful« and »developmentally and educationally significant«? How can a »curriculum help young children to achieve goals«? What kind of curricular goals are desirable? Due to its abstraction, the policy appears as shallow. It cannot give any profound orientation. One cannot even disagree with it. As the wording, phrasing of the policy is not built up in a thought-out way, it can even appear nonsensical. At the same time, the understanding of a policy is simply taken for granted.

»The Emperor has no clothes ...« is a fitting metaphor that Hans-Christian Andersen has coined in his fairytale from 1837. In German, one also speaks of »container terms« (Containerbegriffe). Container terms are unclear as they comprise many attributes by which they can be triggered, anyway, without being reasoned and without proper communication. In the following, we will elaborate on problems we regard as the »neoliberal metaphysics« of contemporary policies.

3 »Neoliberal Metaphysics«

Since the 1990s, neoliberalism became the overall defining economic/political ideology in nearly all parts of the world. Neoliberalism, to Pierre Bourdieu (1998), »is a »strong discourse« which is so strong and so hard to fight because it has behind it all the powers of a world of power relations which it helps to make as it is, in particular by orienting the economic choices of those who dominate economic relations and so adding its own – specifically symbolic – force to those power relations.« (ibid., p. 95)
Examples for political ideologies in the educational sector are »principles of universal education, best practices, or ›no child left behind‹« (Bascia et al. 2005, XIX). – The intention with a policy is to achieve certain rational outcomes as the acting persons are supposed to contribute to the ›public good‹. Accordingly, policies, output-standards, instructions, commands and demands, are often relating to, and explained by s.c. ›best practice‹.

Best practice discourses imply a technocratic conception of practical inquiry; in the case of education this is defined by the operationalization of educational aims and the articulation of them as measurable behavioral objectives, rather than critically questioning a particular set of goals (Kessler 1991; Eisner 1994). Within a technological conception of praxis, s.c. ›best practice‹ describes and prescribes practices that are supposed to best meet ideological commitments. As we have argued above, we cannot find any ›reflexivity of practice‹ in policy prescriptions of best practice.

In addition to best practice-recommendations, standards, assessment and accountability are at the forefront of political, ideologically backed undertakings. Accountability is the duty of an attendee to prove one’s compliance with a specific system, by confirming given norms and applying appropriate measures and records. In a policy, thus, a governing body focuses the talent and potential of citizens to follow a system of guidelines, hereby, approving their accountability. As far as accountability is seen as »the engine of policy« (Cotter 2000 quoted in Mulford 2005, p. 281). The policy as a system of guidelines will be combined with standard-based evaluations. In relation to schools, the OECD (2001) points out: »Procedures for setting a central curriculum, for inspecting schools or for assessing pupils and publishing results at a school level are all pressures that encourage school managers to conform to a well-defined set of norms.«

Top-down accountability is subjecting teachers to pressures to align their practice to policy prescriptions. Therefore, the possibilities for practitioners’ participation in the formation of norms of conduct are severely restricted. – Let us shortly explain this: If, under the rule of policies, those who are not legitimized through them are simply not recognized as social actors (Bourdieu 1998), then, practical civil engagement is hardly addressed. When policies subordinate individuals to given norms and address them as subjects to be held accountable, joint civic activities of public concern that are intended to practically improve the quality of life in a community are habitually eclipsed. Thus, the conversational dimensions of society are faded out. With that, not least the pedagogical undertaking of giving the group of young people a voice in intergenerational contexts is overshadowed, even if the policy may prescribe it.

If we look at the quote of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC 2020) again: The terms ›meaning‹, ›culture‹, ›responsivity‹,
>development< are recurrent hints to the fundamental nature of reality (like democracy, freedom, justice, equity, identity etc.). However, in the quote they are applied as >container terms< or >abstract nouns<, i.e. as such intangible, fundamental concepts or ideas that do not go along with a definition. One can understand them on one’s own accord. Similarly, in the quote, accountability appears as being regarded as allegedly ensuring that a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a policy, e.g. curricular goals, is meaningful. This is happening by just stating and affirming that it is, this, without giving any explanation about the deliberations and considerations behind it.

As long as the option is kept open that the notions of a policy may be understood in multiple ways and would lead us to diverse courses of action, it is also possible that supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly. However, when the preschool teachers are evaluated along the abstract nouns of the policy, a shared understanding of which is simply presumed with no hint to the need of further dialogue, their daily practices are subtly being authoritatively managed.

We identify the specific language ductus of the policy (>meaning<, >significance<, etc.) as >neoliberal metaphysics<; Immanuel Kant (1781, o.S.) explained metaphysics as transcending the entire sensible world. Philosophical metaphysics is a sounding board that allows for thoughtfulness that pursues an in-depth explanation of reality. Kant calls it >dogmatism of metaphysics< if we do not reflect upon, look at, gaze at, and be aware of (theoria) what we mean by our ideas. Today, philosophy has fallen into disrepute (Bohrer 2011). Almost fifty years ago, Rauche argued, »abdication of philosophy as critical, reflective theory leads to the abdication of man as a critical, reflective individual, one that is free to dissent and to say No to the system. Man is perverted and alienated from his true nature. He is forced to conform and to lead an ›unauthentic existence‹ within the system.« (Rauche 1974, synopsis)

If theoretical inquiry and thoughtfulness are abandoned, also thought-out clarification of education and Bildung will lose proposition. If people shall rely in a large degree on shared law instead of shared meaning, it hinders endeavors to build communal understanding. – The educational scientist Michael Q. Patton (2015, p. 193) writes in his book Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: »The allure and seduction of best-practice thinking poisons genuine dialogue about both what we know and the limitations of what we know. [...] That modeling of and nurturing deliberative, inclusive, and, yes, humble dialogue may make a greater contribution to societal welfare than the search for generalizable, ›best-practice‹ findings – conclusions that risk becoming the latest rigid orthodoxies even as they are becoming outdated anyway.«
He draws the consequence: »The only best practice in which I have complete confidence is avoiding the label ‹best practice›.« (ibid.) Patton stresses conversation and dialogue, in which people, directly or indirectly, exercise power by differentiating views and bringing up multiple options of acting. Accordingly, the American educational philosopher, Nel Noddings (2013) elucidates the limitations of accountability by highlighting relational ethics instead.

4 Relational Ethics and Theory

Within philosophical metaphysics, the fundamental nature of reality and the first principles of being, identity and change are usually explicated and clarified by theoretical inquiry. Within philosophy, the properties of human existence, objects and processes in space and time are unfolded as ‹conceptions›. Conceptions are abstract or generic ideas that are generalized from particular instances. A concept is a mental representation, an idea of something; a conception is the ability, activity, or result of creating concepts. Ideas about human life, death and world are interpreted by an explicit understanding that can be justified (firstly by ratio), and reconceptualized in terms of taking in other perception, logic, opinion and reality, ethics and esthetics. One can say that the social aim of philosophical concepts lies in grasping the fundamental nature of reality in order to make ideas, i.e. concepts about it communicable, questionable, and to make it possible to relativize and to contest them. The philosophical reflection on new perspectives, in turn, represents a heightened, also ‹hermeneutic› awareness in which reflectively generated and tentatively held knowledge is tested. This can also be done through engaged action.

Practical inquiry or thoughtfulness continually refers to concepts and ideas about equality, freedom, justice, etc. However, as far as policies are comprised of container terms, practitioners, e.g. pedagogues, will not find answers to practical challenges there. A conscious, personally sensitive and ethically informed reflection on a status quo, as well as on possible alternatives and changes is needed. Often established beliefs and habits (Gauthier 1963) will be challenged through practical inquiry. Teachers are constantly confronted with concepts derived from every child, parent, colleague, policy, society, etc., as well as by the systematics of the diverse subject areas. It requires courage and commitment to listen and respond to these. This often takes place through conversation. Pedagogues are challenged with the task of acting with responsibility in the face of this multitude of one’s own concepts, or those of others. – Noddings (2013) suggests responsibility, instead of accountability, might even be a generative concept for educational practice. »Whereas accountability points
upward in the hierarchy and tends to direct teachers’ attention to their own vulnerability for rewards or penalties.« (ibid., p. 8) Noddings explains «responsibility points downward in the chain of power to those dependent on our care and competence« (ibid., p. 8).

She stresses that responsibility follows relational ethics and is enacted through ethics of care, whereas accountability can distract practitioners from deliberations regarding pedagogical responsibilities for »the physical and emotional safety of their students and for their moral, aesthetic, and social growth, as well as their intellectual development« (ibid., p. 8).

As being responsible embraces listening and responding to somebody, deliberations regarding pedagogical responsibilities are always conceptual and conversational in their character.

In this paper, we will identify the positions of two representatives for philosophical thinking, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and Richard Rorty (1931–2007) who lived in the same time period and represent two philosophical directions that were very influential in their respective countries and over and beyond, hermeneutics and pragmatism. Our intention is to delineate how these two philosophical traditions can inform pedagogical conversations. These two different perspectives promise to shed light on tacit dimensions in self-understanding everyday practice. More specifically, we will elucidate their concepts of interpersonal conversation and responsibility. Gadamer (2004) describes the ongoing reflexivity in a dialogue that aims at a common agreement on shared meaning, normativity and conceptions as Bildung.

5 Bildung as Conversation: Gadamer

»Education (Erziehung) is to educate oneself; cultivation, or formation (Bildung) is self-cultivation«, writes Gadamer (2001, p. 529).

In his booklet »Education is educating oneself« (2000), he self-understandingly stands in for pedagogy in its own dignity. He does this in explicit distinction from regimes of society such as the naive faith in progress, mass media, work market, and the like (ibid., p. 46), instead closely relating education to conversation: »the most important is, in my eyes, to be able to respond, when one is asked, and to ask questions and receiving responses.« (ibid., p. 20)

Gadamer (2004) states that by reasoning, a person will come to a result, or persons in dialogue will come up with generalizations and shared meanings. Gadamer writes: »The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of

1 Translations from German are done by the authors.
understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning [...] the goal of all attempts to reach an understanding is agreement concerning the subject matter.« (ibid., p. 292)

There is no common meaning right from the start. The shared or common meaning will – in a hermeneutical circle – be overworked again and again. Gadamer (2004) describes the ultimate goal of hermeneutics as follows: »we are moving in a dimension of meaning that is intelligible in itself and as such offers no reason for going back to the subjectivity of the author.« (ibid., p. 292)

According to Gadamer, there is »meaning that is intelligible in itself«, an understanding for the normativity of ideas that one can aim at. To commonly approach it will be the ground of social responsibility. Gadamer (ibid.) describes the phenomenology of a common horizon as the experience of the other being different from the subject, at the same time as her or his position becomes intelligible through »the art of conversation«, which he explains as »argument, question and answer, objection and refutation«. – How does this refer to the classroom?

There is a self-understanding and implicit consent that a classroom situation is modelled as conversation. A conceptual understanding of the commitment of conversation can be evolved with Gadamer’s (ibid.) principles of conversation. Instead of regarding a notion as meaningful by just stating and affirming that it is without giving any explanation, as it is the case with abstract nouns and container terms, Gadamer (ibid.) stresses that trying to understand a person with different, even opposite ideas would sharpen one’s concepts: »[...] we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he [e.g. our partner in conversation] has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right. If we want to understand, we will try to make his arguments even stronger.« (ibid., p. 292)

»In a conversation, when we have discovered the other person’s standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him.« (ibid., p. 302)

By assuming that the other person might be right at the same time as the conversation with him or her is about finding a common ground, the option is kept open that notions may be understood in multiple ways. At the same time, Gadamer deemphasizes the hereto related arbitrariness of opinions and conceptions and, with it, the experience of a lack of stable definition and meaning by putting listening closely to the other to the foreground as the possibility of finding a common ground.

This becomes even more noticeable in the other principle of conversation of Gadamer, in which he refers to Kant’s idea that nothing is simply given in
the human world. Humanity is horizon, from which we understand each other in language and conversation. Before this horizon, also the process of an individuation of those who are involved in a conversation takes place and their uniqueness comes out. Gadamer writes »[...] the specific contents of the conversation are only a means to get to know the horizon of the other person.« (ibid., p. 302)

One could claim that ideas of the other person are singular, thus, not being relevant for the ›public good‹. Gadamer would not go along with that: Especially, when the partners in conversation are interested in the perspectives of each other, using their words for making the other explain more and more of her or his position, i.e. making her or him unfold concepts, a mutually respectful conversation can evolve. Then, an inner dialogue can be triggered that is not only led by the need of self-assertion and, thus, by subjectivity, but by the shared intention to grasp a specific subject matter. Through reciprocal conversation, both dialogue partners are supposed to grasp a topic, and broaden how their topic can be understood. »To conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross purposes. Hence it necessarily has the structure of question and answer. The first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us [...] following up] the inner logic with which the subject matter is developed in the conversation. To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented [...] we have seen that to question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid.« (ibid., pp. 360)

Gadamer (ibid.), thus, understands conversation in terms of more principles than assuming the other being right and holding the common horizon open. He also regards maieutic questions as means of doing this. Such questions are directed to make the other unfold her or his position and, by this, also to ›the immanent logic of the subject matter‹. This is done by explaining a thing in terms of ›the art of seeing it in the unity of an aspect‹ or ›forming concepts through working out the common meaning‹. In Gadamer’s words: »The speaker (der Redende) is put to the question (zur Rede gestellt) until the truth of what is under discussion (wovon der Rede ist) finally emerges. The maieutic productivity of the Socratic dialogue, the art of using words as a midwife, is certainly directed toward the people who are the partners in the dialogue, but it is concerned merely with the opinions they express, the immanent logic of the subject matter that is unfolded in the dialogue. What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors’ subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation..."
knows that he does not know. As the art of conducting a conversation, dialectic is also the art of seeing things in the unity of an aspect (synhoran eis hen eidos) – i.e., it is the art of forming concepts through working out the common meaning. What characterizes a dialogue, in contrast with the rigid form of statements that demand to be set down in writing, is precisely this: that in dialogue spoken language – in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other’s point – performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics.« (ibid., p. 361)

Instead of putting up a timeless method, Gadamer refutes the possibility of an interpretive style that was able to transcend our necessary situatedness. He moreover identifies the conditions of concrete, intersubjective meaning-making and understanding (in German Verständigung) as means of interpretation. As an aspect of everyday life, interpersonal conversation, thus, «creates theory within practice».

6 The Pragmatic Utility of Conversation: Rorty

Let us turn towards the United States. There, we find a pragmatic understanding of educational conversations. From a practical inquiry-view, this is very different from German conceptions of educational conversations. In our contribution, we will refer to Richard Rorty. Rorty is an American philosopher who wrote few texts explicitly on education. However, in his work we can see many implications for inquiries into the conversations that occur in everyday US-classroom situations. An essay from 1999 entitled »Education as Socialization and Individualization«, is one of the few instances where Rorty focused directly on education. In this essay, Rorty writes about inculcating knowledge and values that prepare pupils to engage in inquiry and civic discourse. Rorty follows the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, which is a distinctive philosophical tradition with many variations, – initiated by Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and later carried on by John Dewey. Like his predecessors, Rorty’s version of pragmatism is a philosophy of action that takes the experimental methods of modern natural sciences seriously. From a pragmatic orientation, human forms of life are part of the natural and cultural world. Human beings are seen as social and communicative beings, connected to reality through experiential activity. Conversations are understood as courses of action through which people interact with their natural and cultural world. As such, for pragmatists conversations are »an active, adaptive, and adjustable process in which the organism [human being] seeks
to maintain a dynamic balance with its ever-changing environment« (Biesta/Burbules 2003, p. 10).

Rorty’s pragmatic perspective is built upon three related axioms. First, he – in contrast to Gadamer – rejected the possibility of discovering metaphysical foundations of human life or the world through conversation. He presupposes that approximations of the world in all of its facets are always mediated by language. He regards individuals in a conversation as participants engaged in social and political activity that uses language as a tool for creating descriptions and re-descriptions of a shared natural and cultural world. Secondly, Rorty (1982) argued, »there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science« (Rorty 1982, p. 163).

At the same time eschewing the notion that human beings can fully access and represent a mind-independent reality, Rorty argues that the mind never mirrors nature. Rather, ideas are interpretations of reality, an individual’s linguistically expressed conceptions and perceptions of the world.

From a pragmatic perspective, conversations are seen as means to the ends of various human interests. Individuals formulate arguments about the pragmatic truth of a given situation. The presentation, affirmation, or invalidation of these arguments are experienced through conversation. In this sense, descriptions of the natural world, culture, and history can always be re-described in multiple, also in competing ways. There are always alternative perspectives for (re)describing reality.

From a pragmatic perspective, reality »is« what it is experienced as« (Ryan 2011, p. 44) in the sense of conversation being shaped by the purposes and interests of the participants. Through conversation people can describe ways they have experienced the world in cold, analytical terms, or e.g. with a politically charged vocabulary. In either case, a participant in a conversation is never an ethically neutral subject with an objective view above or outside to the world being described. Ultimately, people participate in conversations with aims and ends-in-view shaped by their beliefs about, and images of a ›good life‹. From this vantage point, the natural sciences cannot be decoupled from the humanities because the validation or invalidation of facts and values occur experientially, and are expressed linguistically. Put differently, though empirical findings are an important form of expression, the methods of natural sciences merely provide specialized vocabulary. Thus, using language of the so called ›hard sciences‹ is one disciplined way people re-describe the world. While this can be a valued contribution to a conversation, empirical modes of
expression are not inherently superior to the specialized vocabularies of other disciplines.

With these assumptions pragmatism »is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones« (Rorty 1982, p. 165). On one hand, he viewed multi-perspective conversation as a key component of assuring open-ended inquiry. However, on the other hand, Rorty also saw the competing perspectives that can arise through dialogue as a necessary restraint on human inquiry. Viewing conversations as essentially a social and political activity implies that the scrutiny of open conversations is a suitable criterium for validating or invalidating the usefulness of ideas. Furthermore, according to Rorty, the relational restraints provided by informed people engaging in free dialogue is preferable to deference to the authority of doctrine provided by religious texts or other unknowable notions of transcendence. Practical inquiry is an important way of informing oneself, and avoiding authoritarian inclinations. When practical inquiry is expressed conversationally, socially useful or interesting comments are justified as such by one's peers. In a good conversation one's peers attend to and take up arguments they deem to be valid, useful, and interesting, while disregarding and disputing ideas they deem to be invalid, impractical, wrong-headed, or unconvincing. In time, useful descriptions will be advanced, and unhelpful comments will be quashed. From this perspective, human progress is the point of education, which relies upon well-informed people participating in well-reasoned conversations.

Lastly, the third precondition of conversation is the contingency of community: The organizational structures and normative values of a society change over time. Keeping conversations going is a practical way to maintain hope in possibilities for participants to find common ground and solidarity. Thus, progress can according to the philosopher be prompted when poetic imaginations re-describe common aspects of the natural and cultural world in useful ways. Language changes over time, and it can be used in multiple ways. The selfhood of a participant in conversation is also contingent. The vocabulary used by an individual to (re)describe the world as well as their interests and frames of reference can always be refined and expanded. From this background, Rorty sees conversations as opportunities to use language to (re)describe matters of common societal concern in novel, more up-to-date and potentially provocative ways. He considers the possibilities of creating solidarity or even generating interesting disagreements the primary purposes of conversation. This can also count for a classroom. Rorty provides an argument for embracing an ever-changing world, positing that educational conversations prepare us to deal with the social, political, and cultural problems of the day.
Thus, following Dewey, Rorty’s pedagogical motivations to grow democratic community are tied to a Darwinian conception of human nature. The purpose of education, from this pragmatic viewpoint, is to support the evolution of humanity in a changing world.

7 Summary and Outlook: Policies and Conversation in Education

When one considers concepts of liberty, peace, and justice, and the like as indispensable parts of everyday life, metaphysical presuppositions play an implicit role in all human reality. As concepts of liberty, and the like concern metaphysical dimensions, one is, thus, never free of metaphysics.

In a binding way, education is today conceptualized by policies. Policies apply foremost intangible concepts or ideas that do not go along with a definition, s.c. ›abstract nouns‹. One can understand them on one’s own accord. The meaningfulness of a certain course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a policy, e.g. curricular goals, is only stated and affirmed. The duty of an attendee to prove compliance with a specific system (accountability) appears as allegedly ensuring the ›dogmatism of metaphysics‹ impelled by policies. Educational policy trends attempt to abdicate philosophy and provides an unambiguous neoliberal metaphysical bias that lulls human inquiry and dissent.

Gadamer and Rorty, would both argue that there is no reasoned justification for extant educational policy prescriptions. The dogmatism of educational policy interferes with efforts to understand alternative concepts and points of view. In addition, it overshadows thoughtfulness and pedagogical responsibility in the classroom. Conceiving of humanity as a fluid part of an evolving world forms their perspectives on what conversations are and how they operate in educational situations.

We have seen that the principles of interpersonal conversation reveal the sense of practical inquiry in pedagogy as it occurs in classrooms. From Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenological conception of conversation we can learn that there is the potential of finding a common ground and approaching the immanent logic of the subject matter by closely listening to the other, understanding that she or he can be right, even if she or he is of different opinion. Partners in a dialogue aim at approaching a common ground by thinking through the possible arguments and counter-arguments. This is done, at least in theory, through a never-ending hermeneutic circle. Gadamer argues for conversational discipline in terms of being directed towards the subject matter by mutually making the other explain more and more of her or his position. In
this sense, he regards conversation as a way how theories are created within practice. His approach to conversation, thus, also refers to the dignity of pedagogical practice in terms of civil engagement, education and Bildung.

Rorty’s pragmatic perspective on conversation has slightly different implications for educational theorizing. For Rorty, the initiation and maintenance of conversations are endeavors in which language is used as a tool for re-describing social situations and forming political arguments. Educational theorizing would be the process of re-describing the aims, elements, and operations of educational courses of action. His philosophy suggests what we have described as ›neoliberal metaphysics‹ is merely one way among many of describing educational practice. Good conversations are such that inspire socio-moral imaginations, build solidarity, and highlight disparate socio-political possibilities. Well-informed, well-reasoned and multi-perspective conversation is, thus, measured against the social progress it shall bring.

We regard Gadamer’s and Rorty’s ideas about conversation as explanations of what Noddings calls relational ethics and pedagogical responsibility, i.e. tackling ›the physical and emotional safety of the students for their moral, aesthetic, and social growth, as well as their intellectual development‹. They both would stress that this can only happen by thoughtfulness that is developed within a conversation, and not by putting up shallow guidelines.

We hold it with Rorty and Gadamer, when stressing that educational conversation is indispensable as it allows us to be challenged by another person’s perspective in a way that can be seen as practical inquiry that leads to being informed. Authoritarianism works to stifle conversation. So may policies also do with their idealized, repetitive and lulling ductus of ›neoliberal metaphysics‹ and behavior regulation. The conversational character of pedagogy disrupts accountability policies as did the child in Andersen’s fairytale who announced that the Emperor has no clothes.

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