

A pedagogy of compassionate rationality and its consequences for teacher education

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Abstract

In the first part of this article I develop a rich account of education that is different to the prevailing dominant instrumentalist notions of education in South Africa. In the second part I explore the implications of this alternative view of education for teacher education.

SECTION I: LOOKING DIFFERENTLY AT EDUCATION

In this article I have followed an approach of ‘epistemological defamiliarisation’ (Fataar 2008, 1) by looking with new eyes at education. I want to follow an approach that ‘challenges the prevailing common sense’ (Fataar 2008, 1) in the hope that it will lead me to a new vantage point from where a fresh view of the educational landscape is possible. Into our contemporary South African educational reality, I have again voiced the old question: ‘What is education?’ and allowed myself to explore exiting and promising responses to the question.

Although I have committed to epistemological defamiliarisation, I need to acknowledge that, in terms of *theoretical framework*, my alternative view of education is informed by critical theory. I was, however, careful to avoid the pitfalls associated with a truncated version of critical theory that itself has the potential to become a source of manipulation. Such a version of critical theory makes use of quasi-causal and functional explanations and pretends to know what the ‘real interests’ of people are. It can easily foster a ‘vanguardist’ view that can be anti-democratic in the sense that researchers can advance interests other than those of the researched. I wished to create imaginative spaces for a more autonomous notion of education, which is why I engaged with the work of authors such as Maxine Greene (imagination), Alisdair MacIntyre (caring), Martha Nussbaum (compassionate imagining) and Seyla Benhabib (cosmopolitan justice) to develop my alternative view of education.

Constitutive meanings

My alternative view of education is characterised by a couple of things; these ‘things’ I want to characterise as what Charles Taylor (1985) calls ‘constitutive’ meanings. I regard *education* as a *practice*, and see these meanings as constitutive of the practice of education, i.e. for me these are the meanings that make *education* what it is; without these, the practice would not be education, but something else.

In a patient argument in support of a central role for interpretation in the ‘sciences of man’, Taylor describes such meanings (constitutive meanings) as not merely subjective meanings of individuals but rather as ‘intersubjective’ meanings (1985, 36). This is what he means:

The meanings and the norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action. (Taylor 1985, 36).

And, further:

Convergence of belief or attitude or its absence presupposes a common language in which beliefs can be formulated, and in which these formulations can be opposed. Much of this common language in any society is rooted in its institutions and practices; it is constitutive of these institutions and practices. (Taylor 1985, 37).

This is the sense in which I want to characterise what I regard as constitutive meanings of education in my alternative view of education. I further wish to present a view of these constitutive meanings as connected and interrelated, that is, as mutually supporting and reinforcing. They should not be seen as distinct, mutually exclusive entities.

Constitutive meanings of education

I

For me, a constitutive meaning of education is the fact that one is capable of *critical rationality*. However, this does not translate into a disconnected, absolute description of either rationality or criticality. The reasons that an educated person gives are not only ones that he or she thinks are true and compelling, but they are reasons that are also compelling to others. Cohen argues that

... it will not do simply to advance reasons that one takes to be true or compelling: such considerations may be rejected by others who are themselves reasonable. One must find instead reasons that are compelling to others, acknowledging those others as equals, aware that they have alternative reasonable commitments, and knowing something about the kinds of commitments that they are likely to have ... if a consideration does not meet these tests, that will suffice for rejecting it as reason. If it does, then it counts as an acceptable political reason. (Cohen 1996, 100).

Whether reasons are compelling or acceptable or not, are determined in *deliberation* with others; this is an important link between *critical rationality* and *deliberation*, a meaning that I shall discuss in the next subsection.

A critical interlocutor might at this stage remind me that thus far I have engaged with critical rationality in a very formalistic way, almost without context. This is a fair criticism. Burbules (2005) takes to heart the criticisms of those who are concerned with formal conceptions of rationality understood as being universal. He concedes the role that context, power, cultural imperialism and purpose play in terms of rationality understood in such a formalist way. Yet, he seeks for a way to describe a substantive concept of reason that will take into account the postmodern criticisms while at the same time avoiding the fall into relativism. He finds this substantive concept in what he calls 'reasonableness' (Burbules 2005, 2). His substantive conception has as its components objectivity, accepting fallibility, embracing pragmatism and exercising judgement.

He argues that what makes reasonableness a substantive concept of reason is that the *outcome* of a specific line of argument cannot be predicted with certainty in advance, neither can it be deduced using rules of logic; rather it is the *process* of reasoned inquiry that is manifested in the thoughts, conversations and choices of the actual persons involved that lead to some conclusion. Although the conclusion cannot be predicted precisely in advance, Burbules has faith in reasonable people to come to conclusions that are themselves reasonable.

In a similar way as I have scrutinised the concept of *reason* above, the idea of *criticality* needs to be subjected to scrutiny. Criticality also cannot be cultivated in isolation of other people and their reasons. Given the purchase that 'critical thinking' has on the current South African and worldwide education scene, it is possible that some teacher educators might try to teach 'critical thinking' in a formalistic and mechanistic kind of way. If taught in such a way, it cannot achieve its full potential. Critical rationality has to be acquired, learnt and practiced in deliberation with others in authentic deliberative contexts.

II

Following on the discussion above, another important constitutive meaning of education for me is *deliberation*. This meaning is closely related to critical rationality and, in fact, builds and depends on it. In a later discussion, I establish links between *deliberation* and the constitutive meaning of *caring and compassion*.

When I reflect on different instances of deliberation in my life, it is clear to me that during these times my own education was hugely advanced. This is why I am convinced that deliberation should be regarded as a constitutive meaning of education. My theoretical reflection on deliberation led me to an insightful article by Enslin et al. (2001) in which they discuss and contrast, in a context of citizenship education, different models of deliberative democracy developed by eminent contemporary philosophers.

Enslin et al. (2001) discuss three models of deliberative democracy, namely public reason (as exemplified by John Rawls), discursive democracy (as exemplified by Seyla Benhabib) and communicative democracy (as exemplified by Iris Marion Young). They find contributions in each of these models for an account of how to educate citizens by teaching talk and that help to illuminate the appropriate role of the values of 'autonomy' and 'tolerance' in citizenship education. These two concepts sometimes are seen as competing, but this need not be the case.

The above characterisations in relation to democratic deliberation have implications for teacher education. These are explored in the next section. For now, I want to argue for *deliberation* as one of the constitutive meanings of education, that is for me, any full account of education has to include an element of deliberation. I envision independent, critical, rational students (autonomy) who at the same time are sensitive to the reasons and accounts of others (tolerance or care), and who will over time acquire the requisite emotional sophistication and cognitive ability to conduct truly courageous conversations.

III

Caring and compassion is a golden thread that weaves through my experience in education as a student, and later as teacher and education official. It is such a vital part of my understanding of what education is that I regard it as a constitutive meaning of education.

Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent rational animals* (1999) helped me to think about *caring* as a constitutive meaning of education. MacIntyre makes the point in this book that human beings, like other intelligent animal species, are dependent on others in early childhood and in old age, due to their vulnerability in those stages of their lives. In those stages of their lives they are in obvious need of care from others. But it would seem, according to Western philosophy, that in between childhood and old age *independence from others* is the desired state for human beings. Independent rational reasoning seems to be what characterises humans between those two stages of life.

MacIntyre then makes an argument that denies that vulnerability is only limited to the early childhood and old age stages of our lives. Right through our lives there are situations in which we are vulnerable or prone to vulnerability (and therefore in need of the care of others) or situations in which we encounter others that are in need of our care because they are vulnerable. To deny this, is to take the position of Aristotle's *megalopsychos* who 'is ashamed to receive benefits, because it is a mark of a superior to confer benefits, of an inferior to receive them' (Aristotle 1955, 9–10). MacIntyre sees this as an illusion of self-sufficiency that leads to a person's exclusion from certain types of communal relationships.

According to MacIntyre, the virtues that we should strive towards are not only *virtues of independence*, but also *virtues of acknowledged dependence*. The powerful message for me in this is that critical rationality and caring are not opposing or mutually exclusive meanings. Both virtues of independence and virtues of

acknowledged dependence are developed through social relationships of giving and receiving. These virtues find expression in established communities, but could also include strangers, in communities that have, in respect of the virtues, developed a sense of what human beings need to flourish as human beings. So, the networks of giving and receiving are not limited to those we know and from whom we have received care. Those who will become our objects of care are not readily known to us; neither is it guaranteed that only those who cared for us at some stage of our lives will themselves become the objects of our care. I want to argue for *caring* as a constitutive part of education. An uncaring disposition undermines not only education, but also the community itself.

Related to *caring* is the notion of *compassion*. Critical rationality on its own does not suffice as a description of an educated person. Reason needs to be augmented by care and compassion for the other. MacIntyre makes a case for the acknowledgement of vulnerability at all stages of life, therefore for the need to give and receive care; his emphasis here is on the virtue of acknowledged dependence. This does not mean that he has abandoned the virtue of independence; both virtues are seen to be pursued by human beings simultaneously. In the pursuit of independent rationality, Martha Nussbaum (2001) argues that it is appropriate to consider the vulnerability of others by way of 'compassionate imagining'. Situations are possible where the voices of certain individuals cannot be heard in critical, rational argument because they might be disadvantaged in one or other way. This is mostly not of their own doing. It could imaginably be in terms of language, social status, power, some or other form of personal misfortune, suffering, etc. Those persons' contribution to rational deliberation is impaired or, in the worst case, prevented.

This ability to show compassion, and especially the ability to imagine oneself in the situation of the other, is for me a constitutive meaning of education. The person, who, in full knowledge of the conditions that prevent full participation of others, displays a disposition in deliberation that is the opposite of compassion, cannot be regarded as educated in the full sense of the word. An educated person would be able to 'look through the eyes of others', in the words of Maxine Greene (1995, 86) and would be capable of compassionate imagining, in the words of Martha Nussbaum (2001).

IV

For Maxine Greene (1995) it is important that teachers release the imagination that is inside of their students in the educative process. She places great value on aesthetic experiences that can occur through encounters with the arts and literature. She is of the opinion that transformations in persons can take place through such encounters. According to Greene, teachers should explore and create pedagogical possibilities for enriching whatever it is they are teaching by the arts and literature to release the imagination of their students. Greene has the following to say about the importance of the arts in school education:

The arts hold no guarantee as to true knowledge or understanding, nor should they replace other subject matters in middle school and high schools. They should become central to the curricula and include exhibitions and live performances, thus adding to the modalities by means of which students make sense of their worlds. With aesthetic experiences a possibility in school, education will be less likely merely to transmit dominant (usually middle class and sometimes usually patriotic) traditions. Experiences with the arts and the dialogues to which they give rise may give the teachers and learners involved more opportunity for the authentic conversations out of which questioning and critical thinking and, in time, significant inquiries can arise. (Greene 2000, 267).

This quote of Greene's points to a strong relationship between the imagination, which is released by the involvement of students with the arts, and critical rationality. It is as applicable to teacher education as it is to education in middle and high schools. In addition, Greene also emphasises the use of the narrative to allow students to 'see through the eyes of others'. This ability, which was also referred to above in terms of *compassionate imagining*, opens up possibilities for the creation of a community inspired by a passion for multiplicity and social change.

Anne Pautz writes in a collection on the ideas of Maxine Greene:

Literature provides a ground from which to understand that which may be too volatile to view clearly from personal experience only. Engagement with literature, as well as other art forms, transports the reader to another reality from which to look at the present moment and lived experience. Just as importantly, literature can provide access to the experiences and realities of others. (Pautz 1998, 33).

I share Maxine Greene's propagation of the use of the arts, literature and narrative to release the imagination of students because of amazing educative experiences throughout my own life.

V

Teacher education should teach students not only to read the *word*, but also to read the *world* (Freire 2004, 90). It should educate towards sharing and keeping alive a dream of a better and gentler world, in which people are interdependent of each other. I see social critique as integrally linked with visions of hope; the one does not exist independently from the other.

The term 'emancipation' is mostly used by scholars in the tradition of critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire, Apple, Giroux and Habermas) to refer to liberation from pre-Enlightenment forces such as tradition and religion. There is recognition among these scholars that there are or might be forces at work in contemporary society that have the same effect as tradition and religion might have had in medieval society, that is, that it tends to enslave and keep people in shackles.

These forces or conditions of bondage are the subject of critique by critical scholars. By such critique these limiting forces or conditions are exposed to public

view. However, critique is not an end in itself; it is accompanied in critical theory by a positive vision of hope for a better future that would be free from domination. In critical theory, critique and hope are two sides of the same coin.

McLean (2006, 8) states '[w]hatever the differences between critical theorists, there is a common dual commitment to critiquing current conditions and to propelling action towards future emancipation and social justice'. The purpose of critique is to show the contours of a more just and free future. It is also important to note that critical theory does not offer final solutions. The struggle for a more just and free society is a perennial one. There will always be opportunity for critique. According to McLean (2006, 9), the 'argument of critical theory should always be kept open; it is an argument against the possibility of a final solution'.

Critical theorists see education as a very important site of struggle: It can be used to reproduce existing unequal social relationships *and* it can be a force for social change. *Emancipation and hope* are constitutive of my alternative view of education; education according to my account must address the concerns of teacher educators and students, inspire them to critically engage with the current educational arrangements and to dream once more of a better future, unrestrained by forces of bondage.

VI

During March 2008 a series of events took place in South Africa that made me ashamed to be a South African. A wave of xenophobic attacks spread through the country that seemed to take the country and the government by surprise. Houses of foreign nationals were burnt down, their shops looted and a number of them were killed. One of the questions that kept haunting me was: 'What kind of people does this?' From different sources, for example, political parties, churches, and other social groupings came the cry that education was what was necessary for South Africans to rethink their relationship with foreign nationals and to restrain them from engaging in xenophobic attacks. There seemed to be consensus that xenophobia and lack of hospitality are the business of uneducated people. An educated person would not engage in such activities; yet those who committed the xenophobic attacks were products of the South African education system!

The work of Seyla Benhabib helped me to reflect on these matters. Benhabib (2006) argues that an international human rights regime has emerged since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. She describes this regime as 'a set of interrelated and overlapping global and regional regimes that encompass human rights treaties as well as customary international law or international soft law' (Benhabib 2006, 27).

In her first lecture, Benhabib draws on Kant's three levels of right and presents the duty of *hospitality* in terms of cosmopolitan right, not as a virtue of sociability, but *as a right that belongs to all human beings* by virtue of their status as potential participants in a world republic.

Benhabib (2006, 16) states that '[c]osmopolitan norms of justice, whatever the condition of their legal origination, accrue to *individuals* as moral and legal persons in a worldwide civil society' (my emphasis). It is important that for me to remark that, on Benhabib's account, the right to universal hospitality is applicable to both citizens and residents alike. Benhabib's concept of cosmopolitan norms of justice is appealing to me, given the global age that we live in and in which education is sought by everybody inside and across national boundaries. I find it attractive also because of its aptness for the diverse (multicultural, multi-faith, etc.) South Africa society, where education as a public good is sought, and also because of the fact that many foreign nationals, especially nationals of other African countries, flee those countries because of war and famine to seek a better future in South Africa – a future that includes educational possibilities.

VII

There seems to be conflict between a view that appreciates the intrinsic value of education and what can be called an instrumentalist view of education. Those who value the intrinsic value of education argue that we need more emphasis on the question 'What is education?' than the question 'What is education for?' I think that both questions are important, but asked together and not as opposites, or as being mutually exclusive.

Jürgen Habermas and Monica McLean provide us with a way of proceeding with this line of thought. According to Habermas, humans are driven by three cognitive interests: 'technical interest' in predicting and controlling the workings of the environment; 'hermeneutic interest' in comprehending and communicating with others; and 'emancipatory interest' in being autonomous (Habermas 1972).

The problem with an instrumentalist approach is that only one human interest, namely technical interest, is emphasised; only the one interest in terms of which humans can take control of the world is highlighted. The other two interests, namely the hermeneutic and emancipatory interests, in terms of which humans can collectively make meaning and in terms of which they are interested in freedom from constraint, are ignored or at best neglected. According to McLean (2006, 60), 'Habermas and other critical theorists claim that, in modern society, interest in the technical control of the objective world is pursued at the expense of interests in communication and emancipation'.

My view is that an over-emphasis on an instrumentalist view of education can weaken rather than strengthen the education of students by restricting it in scope, possibly through over-specialisation and a narrow specification of outcomes, and by ignoring other aspects that could make for a good education. In my view such over-emphasis diverts attention away from concepts of education as rich, broad, critical, deliberative, caring and compassionate, imaginative and allowing for the unexpected.

A pedagogy of compassionate rationality

I have decided, after careful thought, to call my alternative view of education *a pedagogy of compassionate rationality*. This is a name that I hope will accommodate both critical rationality and deliberation on the one hand, and the other five interrelated constitutive meanings on the other. The reason I have decided to give a name to my alternative view of education is simply for ease of reference, nothing more. It is offered in the spirit of deliberation and not as a new grand narrative.

SECTION II: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

I now briefly discuss the implications of each of the constitutive meanings of a pedagogy of compassionate rationality for teacher education.

What are the implications of critical rationality for teacher education?

It implies teacher educators who are themselves capable of critical rationality. It implies teacher educators as intellectuals, who prepare their students as intellectuals and who intellectualise teaching and learning. McLean (2006, 118) describes an intellectual as ‘a person who deals in ideas, questions, argument and critique’. This is a vibrant view of teacher educators and students, which seeks to raise the bar on routinised, unimaginative teaching and is definitely opposed to a view of teacher educators as instructors. Teacher educators, who are competent participants in the communities of practice of all those who teach a certain subject, introduce concepts and different kinds of reasons for different arguments to students in challenging and stimulating ways.

It also implies that teacher educators as critical thinkers (as described above) have the duty to induct students into critical thinking. This they do by for example acknowledging compelling reasons, pointing out reasons that are not compelling, proposing different lines of argument, challenging students to respond to certain propositions, acting as mediator between different viewpoints of learners, especially where sensitive topics are concerned, and by teaching learners how to interact appropriately with other conversation partners.

It implies, ultimately, that teacher educators should accept a role in transforming society. McLean (2006, 122) states it in the following way: ‘[T]hey do so more modestly and indirectly by teaching students who have been introduced to critique, whose minds are developed and who believe they have a role in transforming society’.

What are the implications of deliberation for teacher education?

It implies teacher educators who are committed to deliberation. Deliberation builds on critical rationality and is dependent on its presence. Burbules (2005, 6) describes the orientation or outlook of [teacher] educators that are committed to deliberation

as ‘a tolerance for uncertainty, imperfection, and incompleteness as the existential conditions of human thought, value, or action, yet also [a recognition of] the need for persistence and flexibility in confronting such difficulties’.

It requires openness, reasonableness, respect for the force of reasons and a willingness to inquire further, without the need to rush to strict and conclusive endings. It implies classrooms that have a *dialogical nature*. Dialogue and deliberation need to be practiced by both teacher educators and students, given the predominance of one-way communication (teacher educators to students) of the past in South African university classrooms. However, it is important to recognise that allowance has to be made for teaching moments, because of the expertise of teacher educators in some areas and the lack thereof in students, i.e. the epistemological inequality that is constitutive of education in some instances has to be recognised.

It also implies that teacher educator act as referee and coach (or facilitator) in settings where deliberation is practiced, using their judgement as practitioners especially in the discussion of sensitive matters. This implies that teacher educator create opportunities for deliberation in which they will guide or coach students in reasonability, care and belligerence.

Lastly, it implies that teacher educators are aware of power relations in deliberation and that they are committed to create opportunities for those who are disadvantaged in deliberation. This links with the emphasis that Young (1997, 399) puts on ‘difference as an index of structural inequalities’, the concept of compassionate imagining of Nussbaum (2001) and seeing through the eyes of others (Greene 1995). This requires of teacher educators to acknowledge the importance of narrative in education. It requires knowledge of the different narratives within a classroom as well as a sensitivity to pick up those situations where certain narratives are suppressed or marginalised.

What are the implications of caring and compassionate for teacher education?

It implies that teacher educators accept their duty to care for their students, even for those who are unknown to them. This is in terms of the teacher educator’s role in networks of giving and receiving, according to MacIntyre’s (1999) virtue of acknowledged dependence. Because students are vulnerable during different stages of their lives, teacher educators as independent rational thinkers have a duty to give care to them, and to induct them in critical rationality at the same time.

It also implies that teacher educators have to model compassion by creating opportunities for those students in the class who are disadvantaged in deliberation to come to voice, that is, allowing space for marginal voices. It implies that teacher educators should not ignore, or worse, exploit vulnerability in learners. This is related to the duty to care and model care to students. It further implies that teacher educators should have the ability to imagine themselves in the situation of the other and that they help learners to develop that ability. The teacher educator needs to make especially those students who are dominant in the classroom aware of the situation

of others in order for them to see the world through the eyes of the others who are marginalised in deliberation by all kinds of impediments, most of which are not of their own doing. Again this relates to Nussbaum's notion of compassionate imagining and Greene's seeing through the eyes of others. As discussed in the previous section, this will require awareness on the part of the teacher of the different narratives and the power relations (Young 1997) that are operative within the classroom.

What are the implications of imagination for teacher education?

It implies teacher educators capable of creating transformative experiences for learners (Greene 1998). Creative, dramatic learning experiences utilising the arts, literature and narrative have the potential to leave lasting memories and to change the lives of learners. Many people remember lessons involving certain pieces of literature, books, dramatic presentations, songs, poems, life stories, etc. These were lessons that had a life-changing effect on them because it appealed not only to their cognitive abilities, but also involved their emotive and affective aspects.

What we need to seek in teacher education are the possibilities to release the imagination of our students. In this way, deep learning might occur, students might be able to 'see through the eyes of others', be stimulated to take responsibility for their own further learning and to pursue inquiries, and become part of a community that values multiplicity. In this sense, a character of education that encourages curiosity, creativity, wonder, excitement, fulfilment, discovery, and to be deeply moved, on other levels than only the cognitive, is realised.

What are the implications of emancipation and hope for teacher education?

It implies teacher educators who are able to articulate and identify factors of bondage. This links with Freire's concept of being able to 'read the world' (Freire 2004). It also implies teacher educators who are able to formulate alternatives that take into account their life world. McLean (2006, 9) makes the point that the purpose of social critique in a critical pedagogy approach is to 'delineate a more just and free future'. It implies teacher educators who seek opportunities to build hope and advance justice, within current constraints and especially in partnership with others.

What are the implications of cosmopolitan justice for teacher education?

'Cosmopolitan justice' implies teacher educators that are welcoming of all cultures and who embody hospitality. Benhabib (2006) presents the duty of hospitality as a right that belongs to all human beings. The teacher educator as embodiment of cosmopolitan justice is presupposed in the pedagogy of compassionate rationality. Closed and exclusive environments, the likes of which still exist in some places in South Africa, are not conducive to cosmopolitan justice. It implies teacher educators

who treat students as individuals with inalienable rights, irrespective of the origin of the students.

What are the implications of non-instrumentalism for teacher education?

It implies that teacher educators realise, although teacher education is a preparatory phase for students to become teachers, that education is more than just preparation for work. Those kinds of teacher educators know that there are no ends to education, that education has an intrinsic value of its own and that it cannot be narrowly described. It means freedom for teacher educators to pursue learning with their students, also in unexpected directions.

SECTION III: CONCLUSION

This is the hope I have: a pedagogy of compassionate rationality, characterised by the constitutive meanings that I have described in the previous chapter, and with the implications for teacher education that I have described in this chapter. I think it is a fair and good description of education and a reasonable expectation of a free people, also in the field of teacher education. I offer this vision in the spirit of charitable deliberation and invite others to take issue with my argument.

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