Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy

Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski

Formulating principles, in philosophy of education at least, seems to hark back to a form of normative, conceptual analysis associated with Anglophone, analytic styles of philosophy. But poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophy — at least as they have been taken up in educational theory and in popular thought more generally — often brings with it a relativism, which while potentially inclusive, and certainly constitutive today of the possibility of individual choice, renders the defence of principles difficult. By stating principles in the form of a manifesto, we risk accusations of universalising, exclusive normativity. But, it is perhaps time to question the assumption that these are inherently and always negative. Below we set out principles founded in the belief in the possibility of transformation, as found in critical theory and pedagogy, but with an affirmative attitude: a post-critical orientation to education that gains purchase on our current conditions and that is founded in a hope for what is still to come.

The **first principle** to state here is simply that **there are principles to defend**. But this does not in itself commit us to anything further, i.e., that we ought to do x. This is not normativity in the sense of defining an ideal current or future state against which current practice should be judged. Thus, this principle might be characterised as the defence of a shift from **procedural normativity to principled normativity**.

In educational theory, poststructuralist and postmodernist thought has often been taken up in terms of the politics of identity, and so a concern with otherness, alterity, and voice. Respect for the other and for difference requires that educators accept that we can never fully know the other. Any attempt to do so constitutes "violence" against the other, so to speak. Thus, the possibility of acting and speaking is foreclosed; a political as well as an educational problem, perhaps summarised in the often heard (albeit mumbled) phrase "I know you're not allowed to say this anymore, but…," and the bemoaning of so-called political correctness. The acceptance that we can never fully understand the other — individual or culture — ought not to entail that we cannot speak. This rendering of "respect" overlooks that understanding and respect are perpetual challenges and hopes. Here, we start from the assumption that we can speak and act — together — and thus shift from the hermeneutical pedagogy that critical pedagogy entails, to defend a — **second principle — pedagogical hermeneutics**. It 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 (cf. Arendt, Badiou, Cavell).

This existing space of commonality is often overlooked in much educational research, policy, and practice in favour of a focus on social (in)justice and exclusion, based on an assumption of inequality. The ethos of critical pedagogy endures today in the commitment to achieving equality, not through emancipation, but rather through empowerment of individuals and communities. However, it is rendered hopeless — not to mention, cynical — by the apparent inescapability of neoliberal rationality. But, there is no *necessity* in the given order of things, and thus, insurmountable as the current order seems, there is

hope. The **third principle**, then, based on the assumption of equality (cf. Rancière) and of the possibility of transformation — at the individual and collective levels — entails a shift **from critical pedagogy to post-critical pedagogy**.

This is by no means an anti-critical position. It is thanks to the enormous and extremely powerful critical apparatus developed throughout the 20th century that we are aware of the main features of the status quo we are immersed in. But, unlike the inherent critique of societal institutions focused on their dysfunctionality, or the utopian critique, driven from a transcendent position and leading towards eternal deferral of the desired change, we believe that it is time to focus our efforts on making attempts to reclaim the suppressed parts of our experience; we see the task of a post-critical pedagogy as not to debunk but to protect and to care (cf. Latour, Haraway). This care and protection take the form of asking again what education, upbringing, school, studying, thinking, and practicing are. This reclaiming entails no longer a critical relation — revealing what is really going on — nor an instrumental relation — showing what educators ought to do — but creating a space of thought that enables practice to happen anew. This means (re)establishing our relation to our words, opening them to question, and giving philosophical attention to these devalued aspects of our forms of life, and thus — in line with a principled normativity — to defend these events as autotelic, not functionalised, but simply worth caring for.

Education is, in a very practical sense, predicated on hope. In "traditional" critical pedagogy, however, this hope of emancipation rests on the very regime of inequality it seeks to overcome, in three particular ways:

1. It enacts a kind of hermeneutical pedagogy: the educator assumes the other to lack the means to understand that they are chained by their way of seeing the world. The educator positions herself as external to such a condition, but must criticize the present and set the unenlightened free (cf. Plato's cave).

2. In reality this comes down to reaffirming one's own superior position, and thus to reinstalling a regime of inequality. There is no real break with the status quo.
3. Moreover, the external point of view from which the critical pedagogue speaks is through and through chained to the status quo, but in a merely negative way: the critic is driven by the passion of hate. In doing so, she or he surreptitiously sticks to what is and what shall always be. Judgmental and dialectical approaches testify to this negative attitude.

Thus, the pedagogue assumes the role of one who is required to lift the veil; what they lift the veil from, however, is a status quo on which they stand in external judgment. To formulate more positively the role of the pedagogue as initiating the new generation into a common world, we offer the idea of a post-critical pedagogy, which requires a 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 thus of things that we value as worth passing on. But not as they are: educational hope is about the possibility of a renewal of our common world. When we truly love the world, our world, we must be willing to pass it on to the new generation, on the assumption that they — the newcomers — can take it on, on their terms. Thus, the **fourth principle** entails a shift **from cruel optimism** (cf. Berlant) **to hope in the present**. Cynicism and pessimism are not, in a sense, a recognition of how things are, but an avoidance of them (cf. Cavell, Emerson).

In current formulations, taking care of the world is framed in terms of education *for* citizenship, education *for* social justice, education *for* sustainability, etc. in view of a particular notion of global citizenship and an entrepreneurial form of intercultural dialogue. Although perhaps underpinned by a progressive, critical pedagogy, the concern in such formulations of responsibility for the world is with ends external to education. Traditional or conservative as it might sound, we wish to defend education for education's sake: education as the study of, or initiation into, a subject matter for its intrinsic, educational, rather than in-

strumental, value, so that this can be taken up anew by the new generation. Currently, the (future) world is already appropriated by "education *for*…" and becomes instrumental to (our) other ends. Thus, **the fifth principle** takes us **from education for citizenship to love for the world**. It is time to acknowledge and to affirm that there is good in the world that is worth preserving. It is time for debunking the world to be succeeded by some hopeful recognition of the world. It is time to put what is good in the world — that which is under threat and which we wish to preserve — at the centre of our attention and to make a conceptual space in which we can take up our responsibility for them in the face of, and in spite of, oppression and silent melancholy.