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debating post-critical pedagogy: a conversation in letters

Selma Haupt and Kai Wortmann

This contribution discusses objections to and concerns with the concept of post-critical pedagogy in general and Wortmann's introduction to the topic in issue 9 of On Education (Wortmann, 2020) in particular. In the first section, Selma Haupt identifies three main issues as missing in post-critical pedagogy: first, the lack of a concrete notion of what counts as critical pedagogy, second the lack of criteria for what is good in education, and third the lack of connection to established research traditions within education. In the second section, Kai Wortmann responds to these issues, and in the third section, Selma Haupt reflects on her reading of post-critical thinking. While objections remain, she attempts to capture what post-critical pedagogy may mean.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, critique, post-critical pedagogy, post-critique, reply

Introduction

This contribution discusses objections to and concerns with the topic of post-critical pedagogy in general and Wortmann's introduction to the topic in issue 9 of *On Education* (Wortmann, 2020) in particular. The text started life as an extensive discussion between the two authors via email and was further stimulated by a conference on critical thinking at the Tübingen School of Education organised by Martin Harant, Simon Meisch and Uta Müller. Following these discussions, we decided to make our exchange public. In doing so, we have organised the text into three sections: in the first section, Selma Haupt raises concerns by referring to the introduction to post-critical pedagogy published in *On Education*. In the second section, Kai Wortmann responds to these concerns. In the third section, Selma Haupt reflects on her reading of post-critical thinking. While objections remain, she attempts to capture what post-critical pedagogy may mean.

Objections (Selma Haupt)

Wortmann's introduction to the concept of post-critical pedagogy (Wortmann, 2020) raises several points that are striking. In his reading, post-critical pedagogy claims to refer to two fundamental points of contemporary educational science: a corrective positivity and an eponymous reference (post-critical). From my perspective there are several objections.

Although educational science per se and especially critical educational research (or Critical Pedagogy) provides the reference for what post-critical pedagogy wants to overcome, it is striking that what exactly determines these disciplines has not been defined. Points that would need to be clarified by post-critical pedagogy include: what critical educational science is, who is included, which theoretical and methodological procedure appears to be formative, what research results it

has produced, which analyses are no longer considered useful and, its own understanding of critique. Instead, quite different insinuations about what critical educational research does are expressed without evidence to support them and with claims made that appear to be based on an apparently shared perception or obvious feeling of dissatisfaction. At the same time, the conclusion asks very openly about critique as a mode of educational science, what it looks like and how it contributes to the development of theories and empirical research. Furthermore, Wortmann asks about the use of rhetorical movements and the implication of conceptual assumptions and methodological procedures "what does criticism as a mode of educational research or theory-building look like? What rhetorical movements and figures are used and what conceptual assumptions and methodical procedures do they imply?" (Wortmann, 2020, p. 3). This is quite surprising. After all, how can a post-critical pedagogy arise, which considers itself different from the critical educational research that it claims is no longer useful, as long as there is no answer to these questions? This seems even more irritating in light of the fact that educational science is indeed concerned with its own self-understanding (Fatke & Oelkers, 2014) as well as with critical educational science and the understanding of critique (Rieger-Ladich, 2014).

In this respect, the constitution of post-critical pedagogy is characterised by its demarcation from an unspecified critical educational research. The keen intent of 'post critical' pedagogy seems to be to point out its positive aspects and what is worth preserving. Initially, I shared the criticism of Haker and Otterspeer (2020), that no criteria are given for what constitutes positivity and what is worth preserving or even how this could be determined. However, referring to two specific criticisms of educational research, there are certain traditions in educational research, that have been ignored. In the first instance, phenomenological educational science has been pursuing a focus on the matter of education and rather less on its points of criticism for a long time (Brinkmann, 2019). Moreover, there are many ideas that can be drawn from action research, i.e., how the research subjects cannot (only) be seen as victims of these structures but as subjects in the research itself (Altrichter, 2009).

In my opinion, it is particularly important to clarify concrete positions in educational research from which post-critical pedagogy distances itself, before beginning the process of defining post-critical pedagogy. Subsequently, based on this disciplinary reference to educational science and its traditions and various research approaches, concerns in this field can be located. From my point of view, the clarification of the concept of critical educational science should not only be set out in general terms, but should also be named specifically in relation to the accusations that have been made: which findings are only negative, do not contribute to anything new, are no longer of interest or only want to expose and criticise? For me, the epistemic value of post-critical pedagogy – as a philosophical concern of education – cannot be seen as long there is no concrete central moment of reference, but only a mood, a feeling, or a certain 'central moment' which is assumed to be known.

Response (Kai Wortmann)

The objections raised by Selma Haupt are certainly useful in sharpening my position on the profile and claims of post-critical pedagogy. Firstly, I consider Haupt's categories 'corrective' and 'eponymous reference' to be highly fruitful. Indeed, I confess – perhaps in contrast to some colleagues – not to understand post-critical pedagogy as a theoretical position according in the sense of a bundle of theoretical concepts, but as a corrective regarding what we actually do, i.e., what language is available for theory-building in education. To me, this language can be summed up in the word 'critical', which is why I consider the term 'post-critical pedagogy' to be a particularly suitable eponymous reference.

With regard to the problem of reference: Haupt writes that "what exactly determines these disciplines has not been defined", whereby 'disciplines' refers to critical pedagogy from which post-critical pedagogy tries to distinguish itself. In my introduction (Wortmann, 2020), I attempted to offer a brief sketch of two characteristics of critical language in education to be precepted as possible reference points: first, the debunking impetus (following Latour, 2004), and second, an overly negative way of speaking (following Felski, 2015). This was undoubtedly not a 'definition' in a strict sense, but since *anything* can be defined and criticised afterwards (Mitterer, 2011), I would rather stick to thorough descriptions (Schildermans, 2020). I readily admit that my descriptions of the two problems of critique were rather rough and perhaps oversimplified.

However, Haupt not only asks for a definition of "what critical educational science is" but also a specification of "who is included", i.e., concrete references to texts and authors from which post-critical pedagogy proposes to turn away. Yet, my aim is not to criticise positions, uncovering their structures, or identify problems in their writings. This risks becoming a critical, maybe even denouncing operation: here is a passage to prove my point, there is another passage to refute another position, and so on and so forth. Those who insist on such a form of conducting research presume in advance the impossibility of what I intend: to operate in a space "beyond" criticism.

These are not just my own idiosyncratic views. In writings by Latour or Sloterdijk we can learn how to address a problem without referring to concrete writings. Whenever they mention authors' names or theoretical traditions in their texts on the problematisation of criticism, they are not concerned with those names and traditions themselves, but with certain lines of their reception or appropriation. Latour, for example, does not speak of Bourdieu and certainly not of specific writings, but of "a popularized, that is teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading" of Bourdieu (Latour, 2004, p. 228). Sloterdijk analyses an "arguably trivialised form" of psychoanalysis (Sloterdijk, 1983/2018, p. 115). 'Psychoanalysis' does not make sense as one coherent point of reference, nor does 'Bourdieu', and certainly not 'Foucault' or 'Marx' – to name just a few examples from the critical tradition.

Besides this main objection addressing the overly large indeterminacy of critical pedagogy, there are two other objections that have been made: first, a lack of criteria for the positive (a yardstick for what is good and worth preserving), and second, the reference to missed possibilities of disciplinary connection (especially with regard to phenomenological and action research). The latter is certainly true: important impulses for the further development of post-critical pedagogy could certainly be gained, especially from the rich tradition of phenomenology within education. In this regard, I want to point out that Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019) draw heavily on phenomenological approaches and Zamojski is currently working on connecting post-critical pedagogy with participatory action research (Zamojski, forthcoming).

Regarding the objection about the necessity of a certain standard for the positive, I argue that this cannot be identified theoretically. What is to be taught in school, for example, is not – or only extremely indirectly – the result of ethical-educational-philosophical determinations; but of social-political negotiation on the one hand and the individual preferences of the teacher on the other (Thoilliez & Wortmann, forthcoming). And I believe that to be a good arrangement. Certainly, from the perspective of philosophy of education, concrete suggestions can be made as to what, for example, should be retained as a new part of the curriculum or in school practice – "experiments with collaborative teaching, interdisciplinary studies, integration of recent scholarship on race and gender into the curriculum, and so on" (Rorty, 1990, p. 44) – but such specifically situated

suggestions cannot be measured against a standard of progress or be derived from a concept of the good. In this demand I precisely see the 'over-philosophication' Rorty (1990) rightly warned against. This does not mean, however, that we cannot speak meaningfully of the good that is to be cultivated in education. Just as Rorty speaks of social progress without defining what exactly he means by that, we can speak of the good in education without theoretically identifying what exactly it consists of. Not all speaking presupposes identification or is even itself identifying (Adorno, 1966).

I have tried to make three points in my response: firstly, that the lack of concrete specification of positions or examples of critical thinking in education does not result from laziness or sloppiness, but from systematic reflection within the framework of a post-critical pedagogy. Secondly, this also applies to the concern for standards and criteria for what is good in education. Finally, the disciplinary possibilities of connecting post-critical pedagogy with more well-established traditions in education have certainly not yet been exhausted. Post-critical pedagogy is, perhaps most of all, a debate in the making.

Objections remain: Attempts to clarify the vision of Post-Critique (Selma Haupt)

In and through our discussions, it has become clear to me that we have been looking in different directions and talking at cross purposes – standing back-to-back. As an educational researcher, I had the impression of being attacked. An attack I perceived, if not as unjustified, as undifferentiated. It has become clear, however, that Wortmann's perspective can be seen as a vision. Even if the assumptions Wortmann distinguishes are central to capturing this vision, it is not actually what post-critical pedagogy is about. With this understanding, I have re-read our discussion and would like to explain my understanding of Wortmann's expounding of post-critical pedagogy – and which of my objections remain.

Post-critical pedagogy represents an attempt to leave previous forms of argumentation and therefore opens up a certain way of doing research to a different way of thinking. Thinking differently does not just mean somehow thinking in a different way, but (more) positively, optimistically and hopefully. The intention of post-critical pedagogy is not to correct educational thinking and research by analysing it, but to create an alternative way that opens doors to new and enriching possibilities, to broaden perceptions, to create a vision.

Post-critical pedagogy does not primarily turn away from traditional educational research but focuses on where it is turning. Accordingly, its aim is not debunking, but an attempt to do research differently. It perceives a hopelessness, a paralysis in the discourse of educational research. Its objective is not to capture those perceptions, which I focused on in my initial objections, but to draw a vision instead. The current situation of educational research is not considered differentiated in its various traditions, ways of thinking, and their historical developments and significance, because this is not of importance. The focus should not be on what is no longer desirable, but instead on where the journey should take us. The starting point of this journey is a perceived problematic mood of dissatisfaction that is recurrent in similar qualities but with different references. With regard to my initial concerns and objections, this means the issue of being too negative, hopeless, paralysing and having a destructive view of educational conditions. Post-critical pedagogy has no interest in investigating this mood to establish its origin. Moreover, it is actively opposed to the notion of – at some point – looking back in a more differentiated way (as Wortmann has stated in his prospects).

The aim of post-critical pedagogy is thus to look forward, to formulate a vision, and not to look back. The past is only relevant as a description of a state that we should overcome and leave behind. But, just like a traveller, post-critical pedagogy wants to move on as fast as possible, and this movement is driven by a critical and pessimistic environment that it would prefer not to deal too intensively with. In addition, in Wortmann's reply, I noticed that he does not want the visionary status of post-critical pedagogy to be immediately obstructed by "over-philosophication". Firstly – as I understand it now – the vision must unfold, and perhaps later there will be a suitable time to take a look at the constituent parts that represent the starting point.

With the image of the journey and the creation of a vision being the destination, it becomes clear why my objections to the 'country of origin' – so to speak – are not (or perhaps cannot be) considered yet. Nevertheless, I would like to put myself into the position of a critical educational researcher. It could still be exciting to look at the historical conditions of both the country of origin and the vision, even if they are not (yet) systematically recorded.

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Selma Haupt

Dr. Selma Haupt is an educationalist researcher at RWTH Aachen University. Her research focuses on historical educational research, especially the 1970s, the theory-practice relationship and teacher education. She is currently working on the reception of radical pedagogical ideas.

Kai Wortmann

Kai Wortmann, MSc, is a philosopher of education with a strong interest in innovative empirical research. His research focuses on contemporary pragmatist educational theory, critique in pedagogy, and empirical research methodologies. He is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Education, University of Tübingen.