

Lived Relationality as Fulcrum for Pedagogical–Ethical Practice

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Abstract What is the core of pedagogical practice? Which qualities are primary to the student–teacher relationship? What is a suitable language for pedagogical practice? What might be the significance of an everyday presentational pedagogical act like for example the glance of a teacher? The pedagogical relation as lived relationality experientially sensed, as well as phenomenologically described and interpreted, precedes educational methods and theories and profoundly challenges educational practice and reflection. The paper highlights the aporetic character of pedagogical practice, reflection and research by suggesting that the pedagogical relation opens up for a practice that is ethically and existentially normative rather than developmentally and socially normative, and thus fundamentally shifts the meaning of education.

Keywords Hermeneutic phenomenology · Relation · Ethics · Continental pedagogy · Existential pedagogy

Introduction

The phenomenological and existential European pedagogy at the core of this paper can perhaps best be introduced not through common historical or theoretical conceptions, but through a particular vibrant description told by a young learning-disabled student named Oda:

When my answer is wrong, I know it immediately because Per [the teacher] looks at me with this particular humorous glance and says, after just a little pause: “Yes...?”

Then I understand that he wants me to give the question a second thought. He just

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leans back comfortably and waits. That's why I like him so much. I feel relaxed and smart with him.¹

The gentle gesture that opens up to Oda a sense of approval and respect is the teacher's glance and his serene and trustful dwelling with her. The glance Oda and her teacher exchanges is not a reciprocal glance, as if they were equals and the teacher had the right to expect something in return. The teacher's glance "grants a kind of space and a set of possibilities for Oda without any expectations that these will be granted in return" (Friesen and Saevi 2010, p. 124). The teacher's glance practices a certain caring forgetfulness to Oda's learning disability and is sensitive to her latent sense of inferiority and vulnerable sense of self. The glance recognizes Oda in a way that seems to comply with how she in the moment sees herself; as a person with learning difficulties that is in need of a second chance, but also as a person with ability worthy of the trust of a teacher. Oda's lived sense of self is strengthened and encouraged by this particular glance.

However, the situation Oda describes is likely not an isolated incidence. The teacher seems to be willing to go through several situations of the same kind in order to offer the student a new chance every time. The teacher's glance lets the student experience the look as enabling and encouraging, somehow "knowing" whether to see infirmity or not. Herein lies the pedagogical paradox of seeing students. The pedagogical glance practices a certain willed passing over, a caring "blindness" that is significant as to what it sees and not sees. The pedagogical glance, the way this teacher practices it, is forgetful or protectively blind to infirmity and disability, and constantly strives to strengthen and enable the student, by acknowledging and recognizing her but at the same time passing over what should not be called attention to (Saevi 2005, p. 164). Oda recalls a moment that stands out for her and gives the teacher the credit for her sense of approval. The moment might seem insignificant and lead into other seemingly trivial moments in everyday events in school, but to Oda the experience of self was at stake and the teacher's immediate tactful gesture recognized this in her and responded responsibly to the situation.

"Seeing" as a Pedagogical Act

Oda's account of how she is being given the opportunity to see herself as a capable and agreeable student has previously introduced two papers of mine (Saevi and Eilifsen 2008; Friesen and Saevi 2010). The pedagogical richness of the account however, renders it possible to lift out aspects significant also to the focus of this paper. As pedagogy is understood in the phenomenological and existentially oriented European tradition one may say that the teacher's glance is an exemplary pedagogical *act* that strives toward the good of the child and young person (Friesen and Saevi 2010). The pedagogical act of seeing students presupposes educational practice as well as theoretical considerations and methods, and is, like Oda's account speaks to, a pedagogical relationality recognized experientially by the person who is being seen (or not seen). From experience we know that being seen by someone is different from seeing someone, yet this simple insight, like our sense of self, somehow is too close to us to be recognized as a relational precondition for pedagogical practice (Saevi 2005, p. 63).

¹ This description is taken from a collection of interviews from 2001 to 2002 with intellectually disabled high school students in Norway that are described, translated and referenced in (Saevi 2005). The names are pseudonyms.

The complex act of seeing someone is immediate, as well as pre-comprehensive and even biased, but in the very moment of seeing our glance is intertwined with and interdependent to action. Seeing as an instant pedagogical act presupposes and differs from pedagogical reflection of what to focus on and how to see students. How we see someone, either for the first time or repeatedly, is always ahead of how we act. Thus seeing as a way of interpreting the world is the beginning of action and reflection, because the way we see is the way the world appears to us and the precondition of how we act and of what we reflect upon. How teachers see students and their lifeworlds is crucial to students and to pedagogical practice by the very fact that perception, or seeing, never is a “deliberate taking up of a position” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002, p. xi). Seeing someone or something is the basis and condition of all action and, as such, always includes some sort of understanding and interpretation (Gadamer 1965/1985). One might say that the pedagogical act of seeing somehow unites the seer and the seen, while paradoxically also separating them, precisely in that seeing and being seen is sensed differently by the two persons. How teachers see is related to who and how he or she is in the world, and to their relationships to their students. Likewise, how the student experiences being seen relates to his or her lived self and the relationship to the teacher. There seem to be ways of seeing students that are more pedagogically valuable to the persons being seen than others; like for example the sensitivity of the glance of Oda’s teacher and its appropriateness to how Oda senses herself in the moment as well as when she later on recalls the vital moment.

One may ask, however, if the attentive recognition that Oda experiences from her teacher is what really counts for her. Is the pedagogical glance that strives for the good of each student primary to the student–teacher relationship, or is it just a bonus? Considering lived pedagogical–ethical relationality as primary to education profoundly disturbs the didactic procedure of providing and receiving educational knowledge as a routine or procedural process. Education is often primarily understood as a set of personal or political ideas or ways of organizing students in learning institutions, or as a well-articulated cultural philosophy aiming at preparing the younger generation for a changing future. However, phenomenological and existential pedagogy first and foremost sees education as intentional relational practice resting on ethical pedagogy, and directed towards the uniquely experienced life of the child and young person, to support the entire personal life and life experience of this person. The available scene is our everyday life with children, where children and adults, students and teachers, meet, relate, communicate, and interact in institutions and situations of many kinds. Every encounter is unique, unrepeatable and called into being by the present persons, for a purpose, and within a context. Yet, these child–adult, student–teacher encounters have something in common. For one, the relationship is asymmetric in that the two sides’ intent, authority, responsibility and role differ. The encounter typically has some kind of purpose, such as upbringing, teaching, guiding or supervising. Besides, the relationship often includes some kind of care offered by, or included in the actions of, the adult, although the quality and mode of the care might vary, depending on the purpose of the relation, the adult’s ability to care, the age of the child and the experienced need for care. The caring act, as well as the pedagogical relation as such, are intentionally turned towards the good of the child and would otherwise not be called care or pedagogy. Pedagogy thus primarily is not a term that *indicates* the relation between adult and child as an educational representation, but rather pedagogy is a certain existentially charged togetherness that *creates or lets grow* something presentationally and personally between them, something of a lasting, although often smoldering quality.

The Possibility of the Pedagogical Relation

Mollenhauer (1983) echoing Nohl (1970) sees the relation between adult and child as the origin and the only possible starting point of educational practice. Along with other previous and contemporary European pedagogues like Johann H. Pestalozzi (1807), Otto F. Bollnow (1960, 1989), Max van Manen (1991, 1997) and Wilfried Lippitz (1990, 2007), Mollenhauer understands the adult's thoughtful responsiveness toward the child's subjective life and life experience as the inherent pedagogic qualities in educational practice. These qualities are pedagogically possible and productive only as relational qualities between adult and child, teacher and student. The relation rests on the asymmetric, tactful and personal togetherness that is deeply grounded in the difference between the generations and the personal and cultural need for upbringing and education.

Even though we have all been children and this particular life experience belongs to us all, our familiarity with what it is like to be a child must take on the form of recollection for adults. However, artists, such as painters or poets, somehow in their work protect childhood and keep memory traces alive in our culture; although their ever so vibrant and recognizable works are still only representations of the real lived experience that took place in the past. Lived childhood experience unalterably is beyond your reach because the very moment of the experience belongs to the past. Somehow being a child is also protected by the uniqueness of each child's experience as well as the immediateness of each situation. Lived experience as life experience thus comes to mean something else to the child than to adult or to the grown child. As adults through the course of time, our grown-up-ness prevents us from seeing and from being aware of the child's vulnerability when the qualities of the adult world meet the child's experiential world (Saevi and Husevaag 2009). Children are in the situations of life in their own ways—ways and manners that adults, if they are fortunate, see as recognizable traces. Traces rather than evidence of how the particular child experiences the world leaves us with the possibility of a pedagogical relation, as the child is both visible and invisible to us. The otherness of each child, as well as the adults' foreignness to childhood as lifeworld experience, are qualities of the human life condition that cannot be overcome by pedagogical endeavor, being it relationship, professional educational knowledge, control or constant surveillance. The pedagogical relation is characterized by being an impasse, and can only exist as a possibility that may evolve in each new encounter between adult and child. The pedagogical caring and thoughtful relationship between the adult and child gets its intrinsic life and energy from the tension of the opposite: the utter uniqueness and inaccessibility of the child's self and lifeworld. Paradoxically this is the pedagogical opportunity that renders possible the pedagogical relationship (p. 35).

The pedagogical relation exists in the shade of our everyday life with children, and is practiced within the impasse of sameness and otherness. As teachers we anticipate conformity as well as uniqueness from the child, a condition that calls for alternatives and responsible being and doing in pedagogical settings. The potentiality of the pedagogical relation challenges its ethical base and pedagogical intent, and distinguishes the pedagogic from the non-pedagogic in the very moment of the relation (Saevi 2005). Even more significantly, if the relation between the adult and the child should be interpreted as a *pedagogical* relation, the pedagogical and the ethical are not only intertwined, but have never been separate (Saevi 2007, p. 126). The overriding and constant dilemma of the pedagogical relation is how to practice a pedagogy that is sufficiently aware of the imperfection and profound openness of each unique child, in order not to end in consuming or limiting its foreignness. Can we protect the pedagogical qualities by not making the

child an equal of the teacher and someone they already know? Unfortunately, as adults we cannot step outside the constraints of socialization and conventions, or of our self-centred striving for sameness and synchronization of views and wills, and decide to overcome these constraints and become successful parents and teachers. What we can do, however, is constantly to try to be attentive to the experience of the child and to acknowledge the child's utter otherness as the basis and precondition of pedagogical relational practice (Saevi and Husevaag 2009, p. 40).

Language is a Passageway

Like beauty can be the passage to truth, according to Heidegger (1971/2001), p. 54), language guides our practice of upbringing and education. However, language, unlike beauty, often passes unnoticed as a handy tool for practice. The language of pedagogical practice though, speaks in anecdotes, stories, examples and questions that provide opportunity for experience rather than explanation, for listening rather than verification (Saevi 2010, p. 2). The language which speaks of education both is a unification of what is said and an authorization of the person speaking, and thus is significant to concrete practice. Today typically psychological and instrumental ways of thinking are given powerful expression in the psychologically dominated vocabulary commonplace in discussions of education and development. This is a vocabulary that has become ever more professionalized and instrumentalised, with the “non-specialized” meanings of older terms either being gradually re-defined or replaced with terms or meanings that are specialized, and instrumentally or psychologically charged (Friesen and Saevi 2010). The word *education* itself provides a good example. Originally referring to the general “process of nourishing or rearing a child or young person”, this term has increasingly come to refer to what happens exclusively in the school, namely the “systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young” (Old English Dictionary (OED)). *Erziehung*, the closest German equivalent to education provides an alternative example. *Erziehung* can be translated as “breeding, “education”, or “upbringing”, blurring the boundary between school and home, personal and professional (Friesen and Saevi 2010). The meanings and availability and unavailability of specialized educational vocabularies within psychology, biology and means-ends rationality in general, lead effectively but almost imperceptibly to certain ways of thinking, speaking, and writing that can be difficult but valuable to retrace and reconsider (p. 126). Education has become a specialized term of psychologically charged methods and a distinct focus on self-improvement, while *Erziehung* belongs to a culture where pedagogical practice was influenced by the unspecialized language of questions and uncertainties that in itself encloses an emphasis on existential ways of being and acting. Here the “tasks and responsibilities of teaching are no longer framed by essentialistic definitions of the ontogenetic and phylogenetic provided by psychology [...] but are seen as emerging from a sustained encounter between generations, specifically between a particular adult or teacher and a particular child or student as persons” (p. 142). If language has the ability to let practice happen, or to help us see and practice the “isness” of pedagogical practice, what then is the suitable language for education seen as a potential pedagogical relational practice?

A suitable language for which Mollenhauer and we as pedagogues search should be seen both as a literal language of educational research and the language presented and represented by the teacher in the classroom. However, this unspecialized language also is the “language” in the sense of visual, cinematic and narrative or fictive languages (p. 127). An unspecialized

language is inherently concrete, tangible, detailed and situated to events, settings, relations and persons. Fiction, painting and film address us personally and compellingly and thus have an “intrinsic portability or “translatability” across cultures” (p. 142). Languages like these are existential and mantic²-expressive and have the potential of addressing teachers and students personally in transformative ways non-cognitively as well as cognitively. The unspecialized language speaks to our lived understanding that is less cognitive than we tend to believe. Lived understanding rather is intertwined in our relational existence, because simply “by living one’s life and by reflecting on existence, we bring life out of concealedness by living its intentional meaning” (Henriksson and Saevi 2009, p. 41).

The Aporetic Character of Pedagogy

The pedagogical relation is the existential ethical basis of pedagogical practice and its intention and qualities are conditions sustaining that the relationship between the child and the adult is a pedagogical relationship and not another kind of relation among the variety of sorts of human relationships. The existential condition though, also “entails an acute awareness of the limitations of this approach to pedagogy” (Friesen and Saevi 2010, p. 142) as the absence of certainties, formulas and methods, exchanged by the pedagogical relation impress upon us the paradoxical and aporetic character of pedagogy. Mollenhauer notices the need for this aporetic quality when he says, “The more finely the net of pedagogical strategies and institutions is woven, the greater a contribution that is expected from pedagogy toward social progress, the more difficult it becomes to validate this” [aporetic character] (1983, p. 88). Pedagogy is aporetic to Mollenhauer in that it tries to describe and strengthen the fundamentally open and indefinite child about whom nothing final or decisive can be said. The profoundly personal and ethical relation between adult and child that cannot be defined in specialized language is a relation intended to guide and support each child’s way towards humanity and selfhood.

In conclusion, for the existential phenomenological approach to education, with its prioritization of concrete existence over abstract essence, the pedagogical relation can be described as situationally and ethically normative rather than developmentally and socially normative (Friesen and Saevi 2010, p. 140). The notion of education as an unspecialized practice; as a way of simply and authentically “being with” children means that it is not principally a matter of enumerable set of skills and competences, which are (or are not) one’s possession. Pedagogy is instead a question of who and how one *is* in relation to children. It is a matter of one’s disposition, one’s personal, physical and emotional presence or presentation, of one’s personal relationship with *this* particular child (p. 143). The paradoxical and at the same time differentiating qualities of the pedagogical relation radically shift the meaning of education by ethically challenging the lived relationality of each encounter between adult and child, teacher and student.

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