

## **Learning, education and the ethical question of what we offer to pupils**

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### **1. Towards a language of learning – The Neoliberal Self in Education**

About 15 years ago, Gert Biestas (2005) diagnosis of the change from a language of education to a language of learning marked a seemingly forgotten critical point in our discussion of education. His argumentation entailed that education has become learning and we expect no more from this learning processes than to make students fit for the labour market. In fact, critical positions that criticize the neo-liberal character of education are in an absolute minority compared to approaches that deal with the optimisation of student performance. I do not want to overstretch this aspect, because I believe that many of us have got a critical picture of what we all see as a guiding principle in education: Always more, always faster, always more effective and always more competition. It is quite clear that the education system has been ambivalent since it was instituted. On the one hand, the demands of a growing and changing economy (with leading principles of qualification and selection).

On the other hand, education represents the emancipation claims of social movements. It was certainly never the case that the functional demands on education (that is qualification and selection) were in danger of being "overtaken" by the emancipative-humanistic. But the diagnosis today is: Education is nowadays only qualification and selection and the one dimensional nature of social cooperation (Herbert Marcuse's motif) corresponds to the one dimensional nature of the people who pass through the education system. For no one is education connected with the idea of the moratorium, a time of growth without growth, a time of individual autonomy that can be understood independently of the exploitation aspect of one's own human capital.

2.

Criticism of this briefly illustrated development exists in a visible way. But less often with concern to ask if autonomy and emancipation have a place in new school agendas but more often in relation to the critique of inequalities and the inequity aspect in education. It must be kept in mind that both ways to criticize are closely linked. Neoliberal education mostly do promote inequalities. But both aspects are not the same. I want to draw attention to a certain paradox that I understand as a paradox of criticizing only the inequality aspect: according to this, neoliberalism can certainly contribute to a higher degree of equity and equality without losing its destructive and one-dimensional character. Why is that so?

Today, criticism of injustice in education clearly dominates across all discourses. Since PISA, but in most international debates earlier, educational research has been charged with monitoring and evaluating equal opportunities in education. And there are a lot of data on educational inequalities. They show that initial advantages of those who have a good family background and this means a good "management" of their school careers are the key point of the debate on educational inequalities. These advantages according to social background can only be caught up if schools are as socially mixed as possible and the school together is as long as possible - so that the families have less contact with the children, starting school as long as possible on the day and as early as possible in the life course. That means: To criticize that education is unequal might be part of an emancipatory agenda. But it's not just that and not without side effects. Sometimes we even achieve the opposite. The criticism of the lack of equal opportunities leads to an even stronger access to education as a competitive moment. Equality of performance is the 50% claim to emancipation, it's just the half or even less. The equity issue is not immune to its neoliberal appropriation, because it already carries the competitive moment within. Even more, the left hand (Bourdieu) in education has proved to be extremely susceptible to the meritocratic (performance) ideology

(doxa) and thus to neoliberalism. It's like a mutual susceptibility, you could say. Neoliberalism also wants equal opportunities. The aim is to ensure that the market produces as many workers as possible who compete with each other (in terms of employment). I'm sure we'll discuss this very issue later on.

What is important here is to keep in mind: The equality of opportunity-question needs not necessarily go beyond the appropriation of education. Quite the opposite: the critical paradox, of which I have already spoken, implies that a critique of a lack of equal opportunities fits perfectly into the corpus of neoliberal reforms. The critical perspective thus becomes a collaborator. Let me remind you that we are not talking here about monopolcapitalism and its strategies in the education sector, i.e. private schools, private education and the channelling of elite reproduction. It is: We talk about neoliberalism as credo (or with Bourdieu: doxa) of planning in all areas of the welfare state and so within the educational sector as well. In this respect, educational researchers are becoming agents of neoliberal reforms (whether they like it or not if they only assist the learning outcome agenda and even then if they help to reduce inequalities). Because we can no longer question the system we are in. Helping the children means making them fit for the labour market. So, we optimise because there are only good reasons to do so. But our activities thus become ethically relevant because we are part of a bigger picture.

3.

To draw this bigger picture, I would like to sum up where we are: critical educational research, which insists on the aspect of the unequal distribution of opportunities, may be necessary, but it is not enough. It is halved criticism and sometimes even leads to the opposite. To give an example: It is hardly possible to overtake the demands of the OECD (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) on the left. No other organisation insists so vehemently on longer learning, joint learning and the elimination of disadvantages of the social background. But: Like educational research, of which we are a part, the OECD is caught up in thinking that focuses only on preparing for the job market, on competition and selection. However, we do not question this very framework. We continue to prepare children and young people for only one thing: to develop and exploit their human capital as well as possible. But is that ethically justifiable? Undoubtedly so, because it serves justice of opportunity, it serves equal chances. But also undoubtedly no, if we do not point out alternatives to the dominating principle of competition. And undoubtedly not, if we know that today other challenges are crucial than those of self-preservation. The notion self-preservation follows Critical Theory Thinker Th. W. Adorno and makes clear that self-preservation is not the preservation of all or the well-being of all). Self-preservation means a subjective principle of survival. This has certainly always been necessary in the past. But it only refers the subject to itself, i.e. only as: I shall be fine. But today this is more than ever discredited. Today self-preservation means self-enrichment. It is about consumption and the interests of the pure individual.

4.

To sum up for a conclusion (to be honest it is a longer one):

Firstly, it is not convenient to give talk without any data that only leads to a kind of reflection. That means to develop a theoretical argumentation and I am experienced enough in the field of research that I know that this kind of talk is not very much appreciated in an academic culture we are part of. But this might be part of the problem

Secondly, the vacuum that we can identify is the question of what education should actually offer to us people, to us as users, to us as beneficiaries of the education systems. This means, starting from Dewey, Adorno and the ideas of progressive education, there is no longer an impetus to the debate on critical autonomy or emancipation. In contrast to critical

pedagogy, however, it is not the concept of critique that is used here, but concept of an ethical debate. The reason for this is that I fear that the debate will be labelled a critical pedagogy what would not be enough. It would be a trap. Critical theories have today become a traditional part of academic knowledge. And it is one that is placed in the back of the bookcase. But not one that is relevant for action. And that's exactly what it should be. The question of education is a current one, because it has already been answered – and we must decide whether it is ethically justifiable that the current answer is that education can only be understood as the best possible adaptation to social conditions.

The ethical question behind this is quite clear. To give an example: When a doctor goes into a therapy that must assume involved risks for the patient, the doctor must ponder about these risks. And as an experimental researcher, I know that there are not very often good reasons to risk the well-being of the people we research on. Ethics committees therefore boycott research as soon as it could produce risks. Interestingly, such a risk assessment is lacking in our debate about schools. If such ethical considerations would exist, our large lab(oratory) called school could not function the way it does.

Thirdly and very much according to this, approaches leading to a reduction of social inequalities are not welcome by definition. Their effect has not been proven, they are limited and we know that they usually do not try to stop the unequal distribution of goods but intervene on an individual level. Most interventions focus on intensifying time, intensifying standardisation and reducing free space in schools. The price for this is the reduction of critical autonomy. Such a side effect does not have to be. There must be an alternative to achieving greater equality of opportunity only through the increasing intrusion of life through constraints of education and training. To argue even more strongly: Anyone who does not want to talk about emancipation should also remain silent about equality and equal opportunities.

Fourthly, the competitive logic, which we do not leave, even when we talk about reducing educational inequality, is serious in its consequences. Competitive logics within capitalism are most likely to produce ins and outs of a society and they are likely to produce the exclusion of groups. Especially of those groups who are sought to benefit from wealth without adapting enough to a certain mainstream culture. Even the most conservative social milieus have long since discovered that racism no longer needs races (as Etienne Balibar would say). Racism without race is the replacement of the concept of race by culture. We talk about culture and skills and their relevance to the meritocratic logic. It is more functional to produce exclusions and inclusions this way than via biological categories.

Fifthly and finally, it is not individual self-preservation, but human self-preservation that is at stake. Today, we would no longer have to have deficient societies. We should prepare people for solidarity. It is for this reason that I stated: to plead for equal opportunities is halved critique. Halving the demand for emancipation is therefore crucial because we are not stepping out of the ideology or as Bourdieu would state the Doxa of the market and thus we follow equity norms which are market rules. As we all know this is not sufficient when facing worldwide challenges. Nevertheless, in education we continue to strengthen the uniforming and reification of a growing generation. We create a habitus that can no longer emerge from thinking in categories of self-centering, narcissism, mass consumption and competition. Not only do they bring phenomena into the education sector that we only know from working life: Stress, overwork, burnout. There are other reasons against. Thinking in categories of performance justice has led us to group people according to what they are able to achieve. We all know that the criteria for performance are nonsense or at least contingent. And we also know that improving the chances of so-called performance is only one side of the coin. Even if more fairness, there remains selection and competition.

Educational justice is now also supported by right-wing think tanks and seems to be a more or less solvable task. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the issue of emancipation is not only not touched by the debate on educational equity, but is also

counteracted by it. The recipe for reducing educational inequalities is the higher standardisation of education. And we "burn" the potential of people who are critical. Especially those who work in schools. Because we know that these people sacrifice themselves to give their students better starting chances. But in doing so they never step out of the logic of ever-more-competition. This is ethically unacceptable.