

**In Favor of Ambiguity:  
Towards an Existentially Sensitive Pedagogy**

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**Abstract** *The paper offers an existential-dialogical perspective on the actual day-to-day experience of children and teachers. According to this worldview, a child's development in school is dependent on the capacity to build relations of dialogue and love with the significant adults in their lives, and to gain a sense of meaning and confidence in the world. Such existential experience is achieved in relation to the child's actual reality, and ability to face concrete challenges in their life. "Pedagogical praxis" such as this, I argue, is never a utopian or theoretical realm, free of dissonances between the child and the world, but rather is an "ambiguous space" replete with insecurities and tensions. Accordingly, the paper discusses the pedagogical implications that stem from this philosophical stance: the role of the teacher and the threats and challenges that our schools are currently facing in front of contemporary, instrumental social and economic trends.*

**Keywords** Pedagogical relation, Existentialism, dialogue, ambiguous, critical pedagogy.

**A Brief Introduction**

The existential-dialogical perspective, whose pedagogical implications I attempt to develop in the present article, is not concerned with the cognitive-epistemological aspects of education or the investigation of teaching and learning theories; nor does its interest lie in ideological typologies and classification of progressive and traditional pedagogies. Rather, in contrast to these academic perspectives, it focuses on the ontological mode of being and on the actual the day-to-day experience of children and teachers in the school—their feelings of belonging and alienation,

enthusiasm and burnout, boredom and interest, pride and shame, success and failure, etc.

According to this existential pedagogical worldview, a child's development in school—their mental wholeness, moral sensitivity and motivation to act and learn, are seen as dependent first and foremost, on the capacity to gain a sense of meaning and confidence in the world and to build relations of kinship, dialogue, and love with the significant adults in their lives. According to this philosophical stance, whose foundations were laid by thinkers of an existential-dialogical affinity such as Janusz Korczak, Martin Buber, and Erich Fromm, the most significant pedagogical challenges are articulated in relation to the child's actual social, mental, intellectual, and physical reality, and an ability to face concrete challenges in their life. Obviously everyday experience such as this doesn't occur in an utopic or theoretical realm, free of dissonances between the child and the world, but rather in an "ambiguous space" replete with insecurities and tensions.

An ambiguous space, as Frankenstein explains, is not one that is inscrutable or vague, but rather the "coexistence of contrary situations, of antithetical properties of reality...the concept of ambiguity implies an oppositionality of values, a disunity, and the tension stemming from that disunity" (Frankenstein, 1981, p. 8). This view of ambiguity underscores the complexity of reality and the range of tensions immanent in how it operates. Moreover, it suggests that ambiguity possesses a special ontological and epistemological quality. In Frankenstein's (1981, p. 8) words, "the illusion of the existence of an absolute truth distorts one's concept of reality and one's self-concept, and this distortion is the opposite of truthfulness. Ambiguity is the root of truth. Unambiguousness is the root of illusion, the lie."

From a pedagogical point of view, an ambiguous reality prevents all efforts to formulate a set of a priori, fixed and objective rules and principles, which the educator can follow at every turn. In the real world, as Nash (1996) points out in relation to normative pedagogical questions, ethics is forever a complex and ambiguous system involving a complicated set of considerations and decisions in a world that requires ongoing interpretation (as opposed to a clear-cut world of facts and ideas). In such a blurry, pullulating world, there is hardly a clear and "correct" professional solution that can be regarded as an "ultimate" or "final" one (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001). Thus, the persistent yearning for an unambiguous human space, free of contradictions and oppositions, is ultimately futile, profoundly overlooking as it does the true, dynamic, ever-changing, ever-becoming nature of reality.

In the following pages I will discuss the pedagogical implications that stem from this unique philosophical stance. Accordingly, I will argue that the role of the teacher must be understood in relation to the unique characteristics and challenges of this reality. Toward the conclusion of the article, I argue that an existentially sensitive pedagogy underscoring the fundamental importance of ambiguity offers an incisive critique of contemporary trends that threaten, in the name of instrumental

values of social and economic efficiency, to render education an increasingly hollow and oppressive experience.

### **What Does It Mean To Be Human? An Existential Perspective**

The existential approach's guiding assumption is that the human condition is marked by a fundamental state of dissonance and blur between the person and the world. Accordingly, humanity, subjectivity, and self-consciousness all stem from our unique capacity as human beings to deviate from the "harmonious," "natural," "inexorable" existence that defines the condition of objects in the world. In other words, our consciousness, of the world and of ourselves, emerges out of a complex and dynamic entanglement of oppositions and contradictions that make up our experience. Human existence, within this radical conception, is rarely harmonious or uncomplicated (as may be the case with animals who live in an "eternal present," to borrow a term from Freire, 1981), but rather are rooted in an ongoing and fundamentally unresolvable paradox. Human beings are social creatures bound in innumerable ways to other people, and yet each of us is also utterly one and alone in the world; we are forever torn between culture and nature - capable of transcending our physical limitations and rising to heights of thought and creativity, and at the same time mortal beings whose earthly impulses and appetites incessantly demand satisfaction. Seldom if ever do we feel entirely at home in the world, in a state of oneness with reality, with nature. This fundamental paradox illuminates the complex and conflictual nature of our existential condition: our very humanity depends on dissonance and deviation; and it is precisely out of this internal contradiction, in all of its dynamic and divergent manifestations, that our unique consciousness of the world and ourselves as discrete beings with an inherent value emerges. Our consciousness as subjects is born, then, out of a maelstrom of oppositions and contradictions that forever constitute our experience, while our uniqueness as human beings, according to the radical-existential approach, inheres in our capacity to realize the potential for liberty, subjectivity, and discrete consciousness that lies within us.

Self-consciousness and potential for individuality, however, also expose our strangeness and deficiencies: our mortality, frailty, and solitariness in the world. The human condition, then, entails a powerful experience of anxiety, purposelessness and separation (Fromm, 1956). To escape the prison of our solitude and act in the world, each one of us must overcome our fundamental strangeness and separateness and reestablish a unity with the world and the people in it. Our healthy development, sanity, and physical survival depend in no small measure on our capacity to extend ourselves beyond our subjectivity and communicate with the world without diffusing the tension in between. This connection, which Fromm (1956) terms a "loving relationship" and Buber (1973) "dialogical relations," counteracts the mechanical and instrumental character of the world, and establishes

the possibility of constituting a new human ethical system based on mutual respect and collaboration. Indeed, it turns out to be an inlet not only to the other and the world, but also to the very core of our humanity. By forming relationships, we overcome our existential solitude and move toward a more human and empathic existence, in which we join together with others to better the world we share (see, Guilherme, 2015).

The uniquely human qualities highlighted by the existential approach, consciousness and connection, are embodied in praxis. In philosophy, the term praxis generally refers to the nature and scope of the reality that surrounds the person and the quality of the relationship they establish with it. (For an examination of the different historical meanings of the term praxis see: Smith, 1999). However, from an existential standpoint, as Gadotti (1996) notes, praxis also has moral, existential, and pedagogical connotations, which concern the quality of human action and a person's image reflected in it. According to this conception, it is through praxis that we act as historical beings, as conscious subjects who realize our humanity: our awareness of ourselves and of others, our sense of freedom to act and to transform that world, and the moral responsibility that stems from such. Unlike animals, who lack (or have relatively limited) self-consciousness and are more or less slaves to instinct, we are not inclined to accept passively the limits of reality as natural and self-evident givens, but rather refute and affirm, reject and accept, resist and allow them. Through praxis, as Freire points out, people infuse "the world with their creative presence by means of the transformation they effect upon it" (Freire, 2006, p. 98). Our unique ability to negotiate the objective boundaries of reality and expand them is what defines our status as human beings possessing liberty and potential.

Such liberty is not an abstract, *a priori* value or some metaphysical essence, but rather an expression of a tangible relationship and state between the person (as subject) and reality and its circumstances (the object). According to this existential outlook, at whose center lies praxis, we realize our humanity and become historical subjects (as opposed to "biological" or "natural" beings) precisely when we make history; are empowered when we overcome the difficulties and challenges that reality presents; are liberated when we shake off the prohibitions and inhibitions the world imposes upon us; and become significant when we have a genuine impact on other people's lives. Thus, we fulfill our human potential through praxis and within its boundaries.

Below I turn to the pedagogical implications of this unique existential worldview.

### **On the Pedagogical Implications of "Ambiguity"**

From the aforementioned existential-philosophical assumptions emerges an unorthodox pedagogical position. Traditional educational ideologies normally strive

toward coherence and conceptual clarity—continuity and accord between theory and practice, means and ends, and initial and final hypotheses. Accordingly, they generally strive to establish pedagogical spaces that are rational, consistent, natural, efficient, engrossing, organized, and coordinated, and are typically averse to dissonances and internal tensions. However, in daily pedagogical reality (both generally speaking and in the public school specifically), this lofty aspiration is practically never realized. Reality in the school is hectic, strange, and expansive, and thus, in most cases, it cannot be made to fit easily into the rigid boundaries of any one ideological mold. The romantic or rational pedagogical-ideological approach seeks to smooth over or obscure the contradictions in a quest for harmony—but this is an endeavor that almost always entails a deadening of the pedagogical space, and sometimes even the violent neutering of those who inhabit it. A “complete” or ideological system is forever a sterile commodity, which fails to take into account the full range of ontological and epistemological conditions of human experience in the school: the unquantifiable complexity of social, instinctual, emotional, cultural, biological, existential, and political needs of those who routinely live within its framework.

The radical-existential approach which favors ambiguity, on the other hand, holds that the loci of power, contradictions, and tensions that exist in the school not only are embedded in its operation, but also speak of the power of human experience within it. Human reality in the school, accordingly, is an ambiguous, complicated, and dense space, whose borders are fluid and charged with constant dialectical tension. Ambiguity, in this sense, challenges the idealistic ambition to establish a “utopian” pedagogical space that is devoid of internal contradictions and tensions, and based on unequivocal (natural or rational) truths. Such utopian pretensions are regarded not only as illusory and specious from an epistemological standpoint, but even as dangerous from a pedagogical-political one, because they threaten to slash or abolish critical yet unquantifiable elements and aspects of the full complex of our humanity.<sup>1</sup>

An authentic pedagogical space, consequently, is one that both maintains and mirrors the conflictual and tumultuous nature of reality and human experience. Acknowledging the value of ambiguity, a radical-existential pedagogy aims, in turn, to nurture children’s ability to experiment in a playful, mediated, and graduated manner in their actual lives, to wit, in the gamut of expressions, ambiguities, complexities, contradictions, and tensions that are part and parcel of reality. In such a pedagogical space, children are better able to discover their strengths and weaknesses, and the intellectual, social, and emotional sentiments that define their unique personalities. Ambiguity turns out to be a quintessentially existentialist

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<sup>1</sup> I have addressed these dangers at length elsewhere within *Other Education*. See: Tsabar, 2014.

pedagogical value: it allows children to experiment with a range of identities and modes of existence, exposes the richness of reality, and validates their divided sense of self, as persons who are at one and the same time individuals and members of society, thinking and feeling creatures, and subjects and objects. A pedagogy that embraces ambiguity recognizes and upholds the value of the full spectrum of situations, sensations, and feelings that are essential to human development—curiosity, success, discovery, hope, belonging, friendship, understanding, but also boredom, alienation, anxiety, embarrassment, sorrow, envy, anger, loneliness, and confusion.

In an ambiguous educational space, the right to safely experiment with reality in all its manifestations (the joyful and the upsetting) is reserved for the child: this entails an assurance that while they may wish to be involved and part of the group, they also have the right to object, to disappear occasionally, to be different, and to not belong; that they may be captivated by their studies but not by all of them, not always, and not necessarily; and that they have the right to participate in a lesson but also to be bored and stare listlessly out of the window from time to time. Ambiguity supports the notion that while many students who may not be good at everything can still excel at some things; and who, while they may not be perfect, still believe in their right to be loved and accepted (which in turn serves as the basis for their own capacity to accept and love others).<sup>2</sup> From a radical-existential pedagogical perspective, these human qualities are the undergirding of all of the child's future cognitive and moral development (see, Lampert, 2012).

### **What Is Pedagogical Praxis?**

An existential perspective regards the prosaic, unscheduled daily reality in the school—including lessons, recesses, school hallways, fieldtrips, parent-teacher conferences etc.—as a sphere in which students' humanity develops and takes shape. Experimenting with the various tensions and ambiguities within this daily reality, provides a gateway to the evolution of their humanity, talents, and self-awareness. This is the arena of pedagogical praxis. According to an existential perspective, children learn to recognize themselves authentically only when they personally encounter and experience the limits between the objective and subjective aspects of reality. They discover the limits of their "individuality" precisely through dependence on the social group and by wrestling with their desire to be "one of the gang"; when debating, for instance, whether to take a drag on the cigarette that someone passes them in a secluded corner during recess, they experience "liberty" precisely when it is limited by the imperatives and rules of the institution they

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<sup>2</sup>As was beautifully put by Victor Hugo: "The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves". 'Les Miserables' Chapter IV. M. Madeleine in Mourning (p.495).

attend; they encounter the limits of their own bodies and will-power—precisely when climbing a steep mountain on a fieldtrip—while struggling with the humiliating temptation to complain to the guide of a hurt foot, and to ask to return to the bus. Through pedagogical praxis, a concrete and authentic sense of self-efficacy and self-worth emerges out of the child's (subjective) experimentation with the (objective) boundaries of reality.

Translating reality into pedagogical praxis depends on the teacher's ability to identify points of tension in the educational space and to mediate them for their students. Such a task involves not only a capacity to observe reality, but a willingness to do the hard work required within it. The teacher, who is the primary agent of praxis in the educational space, helps students to bear the frustration and physical and psychological distress that befalls them in the encounter with the limits of reality. During the long field trip, on a path to the mountain ascent, the teacher encourages a struggling child to keep walking and tighten the straps of her backpack, so she can carry the weight more easily; at the end of the trek, the teacher commends the child with a pat on the back. At another school situation, a stressed student freezes in front of a mathematics selection exam that fills him with dread on account of its consequences for his future. The teacher notices and approaches – she sits down alongside him and explains: “this is the first step in solving the problem,” “this is how you multiply a fraction.” She lightly places her hand on his shoulder and guides him: “now practice on your own,” “see how it's done,” “stay focused,” “don't look away,” “don't leave your seat.” The teacher's involvement, manifested in the practical assistance provided to the student in applying their abilities to a task, is a concrete expression of their concern and regard for them. It is an existential exchange because it is both concrete and yet ambiguous and because it resonates beyond the actual moment of the present and the functional dimension of the current task. The existential quality of the teacher-pupil encounter establishes the teacher's authority and standing as a significant adult in the life of the child (for good reason students tend to remember “the teacher who did not give up on them”). In such a pedagogical praxis the readiness and willingness of the teacher to be present, dialectally establishes the student's trust and responsiveness to him. This is also a consequential event in the formation of a meaningful teacher-student dialogue relationship, when resistance and suspicion give way to trust and responsiveness.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, this may be the most pivotal moment of all from a radical-existential educational perspective: the instant when a connection is made, and trust is built between teacher and pupil. The pedagogical power of this existential experience is independent of any particular teaching method or curriculum and reverberates many years after the specific material taught has been forgotten. Such a pedagogy reminds us that the deeper foundation of education lies not in the theory that we teach but

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<sup>3</sup> I have discussed this important issue elsewhere. See: Tsabar, 2022.

rather in human experience and the dialogue it produces. Dialogical relations have a paramount existential value: they encourage the child to stray beyond secure boundaries and experiment with reality, while assuring them that there is someone who cares, who will look after and protect them, explain and listen, extend a hand. The teacher's dialogical readiness and willingness in actual space and time are incontrovertible proof of the child's worth, of their being worth the effort.

This existential-pedagogical intentionality is realized in the common endeavor of transforming the school environment into a pedagogical praxis: a protected and supportive space in which children can experiment with reality, develop over time, and build relations of trust with the world and adult society. Such a pedagogical environment relies not on any organized rational-ideological school of thought; it is neither "therapy" nor a clinical "behavioral shaping" program. A significant pedagogical relationship, on the other hand, is based on cultivation of relations of trust and an unmediated existential orientation toward experience—it is based, that is, on directness, and on natural, intensive, and emotional relationships between collaborators. Good teachers, accordingly, are "better than their theory" (Adar, 1963); they are not evaluated on the basis of the mottos emblazoned on their ideological banners or the manifestos of the school where they teach ("democratic," "Waldorf," "bilingual" or any other alternative pedagogical ideology). In the praxis of the daily school routine the slogans and declarations are broken down into simple practices: lucid teaching, empathic dialogue, a desire to help, genuine listening, confident professionalism, presence, supervision, setting challenges, caring, and on and on—intention and action, eye-contact, connection. This existential quality is what emerges powerfully from the pedagogical writings of great educators throughout history, radical and conservative alike: A. S. Neill and Janusz Korczak, Maria Montessori and Paolo Freire, Jonathan Kozol and John Holt. While their pedagogical ideologies differ significantly, they all share the same human and existential affinity, the same pedagogical eros, which does not necessarily emerge clearly from their theoretical ideas (which one may accept or reject), but rather from the accounts of their work in praxis: from their sensitivity to the child's world and humanity, from their ability to communicate with children respectfully and honestly, from their sense of responsibility and concrete commitment to children's welfare and development.

### **In Favor of Ambiguous and Imperfect Pedagogical Spaces**

From this existential perspective, the inherent advantages of pedagogical spaces that are ambiguous and imperfect, or merely "good enough," become evident. A "good enough" space may be defined as a human environment that acknowledges the importance of being able to live in ambiguity and a state of imperfection as a condition for development and growth. In such a space, emphasis is placed on the cultivation of human capacities and intuitive gestures, as well as on the centrality of

instinctive and unmediated sensations. “Good enough parenting,” as conceived by Winnicott (1973), highlights parents’ sensitivity, attentiveness, and responsiveness to the needs of the child. A good enough pedagogy, for our purposes, is one that supports the empowerment of the pupil through experience mediated by a variety of imperfect human and institutional relationships (see, Bingham, 2008). From this standpoint, neither pedagogical experiences nor the diverse assemblage of teachers in the pupil’s life have to be “good” in the sense of tailoring themselves to the child’s every demand, need, and expectation at all times and in all places. Good enough pedagogical spaces are a pedagogical quantity, a means through which the child is empowered and refines the range of their experiences and human capacities: their liberty, creativity, ability to cope with frustration, depth of thought, and self-consciousness. Frequently, such empowerment involves the realization that certain people, lessons, situations, and styles of teaching are not good for them, and that to develop and grow, they must know how to let go, circumvent, disregard, and sometimes fight, but mainly simply learn to manage.

The special quality of ambiguity enables and even encourages students to test the boundaries of their developing selfhoods in adolescence outside the dictates of society and the family. In the temporal and spatial framework of the school, they can take on different roles and identities, stretch social boundaries, and test the validity and logic of prohibitions and rules. They needle and harass each other (knowing it is inappropriate), stick chewing gum under their desks (knowing it is not allowed), play hooky (knowing they are liable to get caught); in one class they might be “good children,” well-mannered and disciplined, and in another uninterested and rebellious. The school in this sense becomes a vast and multifaceted playground, where children develop by testing the limits of their evolving selves. In the school setting, they are free to experiment with the limits and concepts of reality without the sort of risk-taking that has real-life consequences (as in a game): in the social encounter with their peers, they are exposed to the complexity of concepts such as friendship, envy, and rivalry; in contending with the institution’s rules and its adult representatives, they come to understand the meaning of authority, compliance, and rebellion; in their engagement with school subjects and fields of knowledge they may experience curiosity and the joy of discovery, or alternately boredom and pointlessness.

A pedagogical atmosphere that upholds the child’s right to experiment, to err, and even oppose their teachers instills respect and trust in the child. For Erikson (1963), this game-like option is one of the most essential qualities of adolescence, in which society grants the child a moratorium or “cancellation of debts,” until such time as they can stand on their own in the adult world. Accordingly, precisely in an imperfect pedagogical space the student is obliged to navigate all manner of tensions, taboos, anomalies, and dissonances that arise between themselves (as subject) and the various organs of the educational system (as object). Such

navigation may indeed be frustrating for the child, but in existential terms it has a considerable developmental value, because it enables an ongoing dialectic between approach and retreat, acceptance and rejection. This process allows the child to climb a ladder of self-judgments and self-perceptions in a complex process in which initial acceptance is followed by questioning and disenchantment, and finally resistance to the same value that was initially accepted. Similarly, Muuss (1988) emphasizes that the process of establishing an autonomous identity and personal voice in adolescence involves the adolescent's capacity to defy the existing order, hitherto regarded as self-evident, and that to a large extent the teenage years, during which one parts with the world of childhood, are meant for experimenting with such forms of "revolt." This is not to say that the pupil has to reject the educational environment's influence, but rather that for their humanity to best evolve, they must take an active part in the development process, and gain control over the factors shaping themselves.

The same logic applies to the imperfect physical conditions of the pedagogical space. The ambiguous reality of life in the public school compels students to cope in a rich variety of ways with experiences, contradictions and demands from which their humanity can develop. In this complex and intensive environment, they experience failure, loneliness, confusion and frustration, but also success, fellowship, cooperation, cohesion, and devotion in the face of common challenges. In the boundaryless space of school children must contend with the undeniable physical presence of the other: their desires, feelings, strengths and weaknesses. In such space there is none of the anonymity, self-seclusion, or dubious sense of freedom that social media platforms, on which children spend much of their waking hours. Moreover, reality in the school cannot be filtered à la social media: one cannot simply block, mute, or "unfriend" another person without them knowing about it or being able to respond, without witnessing the expression of insult on their face. The school praxis is a tangible space in which mental and physical aspects merge uncontrollably. Empathy, for example, is not an abstract value: through sensory perception, the child witnesses the facial expressions and body language of the other, hears the trembling of their voice, and senses their pain, anxiety, delight. In the tangible space that exists in praxis the mental is embedded in and inextricably intertwined with the physical (see, Scheler, 2009, p. 260). These facts, insofar as they are challenging, have an incalculable existential and pedagogical value, because they expand the scope of the child's interpersonal experience and consciousness, and present them with enriching and character-building encounters and struggles.

This complex and tangible reality, which encompasses for the child the full range of human experience, has a concrete democratic and social value as well. In the traditional public school, the child is not in the spotlight (of the parental gaze), but rather merely one of many like themselves. The compulsory, closed, and

integrative framework of the classroom forces students to interact with one another, to spend long hours, some dull, some eventful and interesting, in the company of children who are different from themselves, whom they did not choose, and presumably would never have met outside of school. In such a space, the child impacts and is impacted by others, is exposed to different cultural norms and ways of life, and is forced to acknowledge the existence of other children with desires and opinions no less important than their own (these strange and seemingly incompatible children often becoming their best friends). This experience is enormously valuable, especially in an era in which niche subcultures are rapidly proliferating, and when, outside of school, children are less and less likely to encounter peers beyond the social circles, online communities, and afterschool clubs to which they belong, where their cohorts tend to be similar to themselves, and often chosen by their parents.

The ambiguous conditions of the typical public school, consequently, are fertile pedagogical ground. They foster values such as delayed gratification, patience, restraint and collaboration, and allow children to have complex social experiences through which their humanity is meaningfully enhanced. The foundation of these skills and tendencies is created out of the real conditions and needs of praxis, rather than moralistic theoretical abstractions dictated from above and conveyed in empty slogans and catchphrases. When deftly mediated by an wise and kind teacher, such a reality can support the development of dialogical and democratic qualities and sensitivities—in the face-to-face encounter, and in the honing of interpersonal skills, whose existential value is cardinal. Grappling with the lack in this situation and the challenges it presents creates an opportunity for the performance of complex human practices: it encourages students to engage in face-to-face encounters, exercise their right to self-representation, gain an understanding of the system of power relations, cope with feelings of frustration and injustice, and create an exciting common experience of spontaneous and authentic organization for action. Such praxis has a pedagogical quality that is genuine and non-didactic—the values it upholds emerge out of reality and in praxis: in bonds of loyalty and solidarity forged in daily life, sometimes simply out of necessity.

### **Conclusion: A Word of Caution**

An existential approach to educational praxis highlights the pedagogical significance of ambiguity and imperfection. Toward a conclusion, I would like to suggest that a possible contribution of this approach lies in the critical perspective that it might offer to ever-growing technological and bureaucratic trends, which are threatening to narrow down the experimental potential of ambiguity in the pedagogical praxis.

The **first trend** refers to the system's increasing tendency to define and evaluate success in quintessential terms of socialization and economics. From an

existential point of view this danger is manifested in a systematic curtailing of open pedagogical spaces (art and music classrooms, fieldtrips, etc.), which are regarded as having negligible value in terms of students' future economic success. This instrumentalist trend threatens to diminish the wealth of human experience in the school and reduce the child's status to that of a statistic. By contrast, the existential perspective stresses the importance of developing spaces whose value is not measured in instrumental—economic and socialization—terms, but rather existential ones of human wellbeing. This framework is designed in such a way as to allow the child to accumulate an array of experiences that support and enhance their sense of self-worth, potential, and distinct personal identity. In the first phase of this process, the space helps the child to develop their talents and tendencies (in the music room, on the athletic field, in the classroom, in the laboratory, and so on), while in the second phase, it provides the child with public forums in which they can express their best qualities, and gain the affirmation and esteem of others. The teacher's role in this regard is to identify talents and tendencies and to allow for their expression in the public space: children with musical talents in orchestras and choirs; those with an affinity for physics and mathematics in laboratories and science fairs; empathic students with a flair for counseling in tutoring projects and community volunteer work; children with organizational skills and charisma in activity-planning and leadership; and pupils with artistic talents in exhibitions and theatrical productions. Establishing the child's presence in the public sphere as talented and valuable lays a foundation for their empowerment and self-worth.

The **second trend** is the increasing power that bureaucratic-technological discourse is gaining in education. This is readily observable in the (over)enthusiastic assimilation of all manner of instructional, teleprocessing, classroom management and computer surveillance systems (SmartSchool, ClassDojo, Michlol etc.), whose ostensible function is to enhance the quality and efficiency of pedagogical work in the school through the introduction of an array of digital enforcement and surveillance tools: cameras, digital attendance trackers, smartphones, tablets, etc. These technologies track not only the student's conduct and academic progress in the digitized classroom, but also their attendance and behavior outside of it, even well beyond the school grounds. Such bureaucratic order might of course have its advantages in running a large educational system, but from an existential perspective, it seems that the surveillance functions of the technological systems threaten to severely limit the possibilities of human experience in the educational space. Accordingly, such efficiency comes at a perilously high cost in terms of human liberty, dignity, privacy, and the right to trial and error in that space.

An existential sensitivity asks that administrators and educators involved in planning and improving pedagogical environments take into account considerations that go beyond the efficiency-oriented bureaucratic-administrative dimension.

These considerations have to do with the significant existential value of human pedagogical sensitivities deeply related to ambiguity—such as the ability to turn a blind eye from time to time, to forgive, to create a space where trial and error can occur, and to allow children the experience of grappling with ethical dilemmas, and occasionally of transgression. These days, for instance, it is common practice for parents to be sent text messages in real time via the digital management systems notifying them that their child was late/absent/suspended. Do any of us remember the harrowing emotional/existential experience of the long walk home with the suspension notice in hand, not knowing how precisely to present it, at what moment, and to whom (mother or father)? Was that not a valuable experience? In the same spirit, the existential approach acknowledges the importance of “uncontrolled” pedagogical spaces to human development: the back pages of a text book upon which a teenage girl scratches the lyrics of a song by a favorite band (albeit during a history or mathematics lesson), or a secluded corner of the school where students can hang out away from adults during recess. A radical-existential pedagogy asks that we “turn off the cameras” and loosen control, out of a conviction that in places where open spaces remain, complex, dialogical, human experiences will grow, experiences that reflect in an organic and healthy way the ambiguous character of reality.

The **third trend** is the drive to create “utopian” pedagogical spaces cleansed of ambiguity and tension between the child and the educational environment (see especially, Tsabar, 2014). The aim, more specifically, is to establish dissonance-free educational spaces where all the child’s “real” needs are met. Elimination of friction between the child and the system is achieved by myriad pedagogical and didactic means (that never cease to be perfected): switching teaching methods, modifying teacher-student authority relationships, redefining the status of imparted knowledge, redesigning learning environments, and so on. However, from a radical-existential standpoint, any zeal for abolishing dissonance has a repressive and reductive potential. The absence of clear-cut boundaries between the inner world of the child and the external world (including the institution, teacher, knowledge, peer group, etc.) dims the child’s potential to forge distinct selfhood. In such a utopian space, the possibility of “otherhood,” “difference,” “deviation,” and “strangeness” is negated. A utopian pedagogical space such as this might end up carrying a significant submissive potential, because it cannot tolerate “negative” phenomena such as alienation, resistance, isolation, disinterest, maladjustment, or uncooperativeness. For in a classroom where everything is attuned to the “natural development” of the child, there is, theoretically, no cause to disrupt or get bored, and hence, disruption and boredom are delegitimized and frowned upon many times over.

A radical-existential approach calls attention precisely to the repressive and reductive potential of pedagogies articulated (paradoxically) in positive,

harmonious, and utopian terms (“inner quiet,” “emotional regulation,” “interest-based collaboration,” and so on). It does not decry the attempt to improve the pedagogical space, and to find within it aims and values around which it is possible to work collaboratively, *per se*. However, it does seek to call attention to and cast doubt upon the “lofty” aspiration to purge the educational space of all dissonance and ambiguity. From a practical standpoint, a radical-existential pedagogy asks (paradoxically perhaps?) that parents, teachers, administrators, and instructional environment designers honor (or at least take into consideration...) the right of the child to not fit in, to not synchronize themselves to the system, and to not take an interest in their lessons.

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