

## Epistemic or Ethical Trouble? On Possibilities for Understanding Students, Their Needs and Idiosyncrasies

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It is not uncommon in scholarship when an academic reader searches for books and articles that reveal authentic insights in education and that can provide real food for thought. They can be tough linguistically or even intimidating by the way they present their main argumentation so that they constantly require from the reader careful attention. Sometime texts are so complex and difficult that the reader needs to plough through them with great patience. But if they really offer some new insights into educational domain or at least a fresh view of it, the reader can accept such obstacles. She knows that her efforts will pay off somewhere at the end. From the outset she takes for granted that the authors whose works she studies have really *something* to convey. So, she is obliged in a way to grasp the message. She really drives for understanding as probably the authors did. The relationship between the reader and the texts has a mutual, reciprocated character which decides not only about its cognitive value but also about the ethical impact that it has on the very act of reading.<sup>1</sup> What can occur then is a special experience that in literature is called a dialogue or a hermeneutical conversation.<sup>2</sup> The dialogical relationship opens up new possibilities for both parties. It can transform the way the reader sees the world but at the same time it can create new horizons for interpretation of the texts. In this interplay between the world of the reader and the world of the texts a chance for a new understanding appears. And finally, the two different worlds come closer so that the fusion of horizons builds up a new quality understanding.

This briefly sketched model of reading, particularly academic reading, shows that dialogical understanding can have a very positive nature, where everybody is invited and the atmosphere serves all potential participants. However, this requires from participants readiness to get engaged in understanding and care for the affirmative tone of the conversation. Similarly, one can authentically learn only in a dialogical atmosphere where everybody

is welcome and has a chance for contribution and being attentively listened to. It can sound at least a bit idealistic or even utopian, but as far as human educational ambitions and aspirations are concerned, it seems to be very realistic and possible. Nevertheless, it presupposes some ethical virtues which are necessary for creating a partnership and a healthy atmosphere. Among these virtues one can find respect for otherness, openness for a change of one's view of the world, responsibility for one's own acts and words, and fairness. It means that dialogical understanding and education require a kind of integrity that transforms them into more personal and tacit experience.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, some institutions and educational practitioners do not embody the virtues that are necessary for inclusive, dialogical education. Obviously dialogical pedagogy is not compulsory. There is a plethora of possible meanings of what education is and what it should be. Educators can conceptualize and practice teaching and learning according to their own personal and cultural preferences. But they need to accept primary rights of all students: to be respected, taught in proper manner and supported in their own personal development. This is why Kevin Klein-Cardena's attempt to present and explain what he calls "hermeneutical enclose" deserves our attention and consideration in educational contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Taking as a springboard *Epistemic Injustice* by Miranda Fricker and *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon as well as his own experience in a refugee-serving education center, Klein-Cardena invites readers to dwell on the students who become some kind of trouble for their teachers, parents, the educational system and finally even for themselves. "Trouble" means that they do not meet adults' expectations and very often are marginalized or gradually excluded from educational services. The main problem comes from the language and culture used in educational institutions that are so different from their own that they are not able to overcome the differences successfully. In such situations there is always a question of personal identity involved and the way it corresponds with communal or social recognition. Lack of understanding and often inadequate self-understanding reflects the very underprivileged position they take in community or society. However, hermeneutical deficits do not form the primary barriers in their educational

experience. What is really responsible for students' exclusion from educational experience is "hermeneutical enclosure," that is "wherein one's conduct is preempted by another's interpretations such that behaviors are pejoratively assigned a fixed meaning in advance." What Klein-Cardena reveals is the fact that it is not just because of limited intellectual possibilities that they lose their chance to learn and live successfully with others but due to the richness of possible meanings. There is "hermeneutical surplus," as Klein-Cardena puts it, that stops such students from participation in educational activities and that leads to their marginalization. Remedy is possible, he seems to suggest, and requires two steps: "hermeneutical disruption or dismantling of dominant interpretations" and "reparative listening to account that are lost in the mix."

I must admit I really admire the passion with which Klein-Cardena analyzes "epistemic justice" and particularly "epistemic enclosure." Although I do not have a clear picture of pedagogical implementation of the idea of "hermeneutic injustice," I do agree that understandings and interpretations still too often become a source of misconduct in teaching and learning and cause real damage to students all over the world. I have no doubts: understanding and learning become blind without critique and sometimes even criticism. This means that the very positive picture of dialogue I presented here at the beginning needs to be completed with some elements of scrutiny and revision. But it does not mean that learning is possible only when it is accompanied by suspicion and negative orientation. Hermeneutical conversation and properly organized teaching and learning consist of careful and attentive listening which can lead to critical review and far-reaching recommendations. All collective hermeneutical resources used in educational practice need to be regularly verified so that they could really respond to the students' needs and experiences. This is why Klein-Cardena's suggestion that we should start with "dismantling dominant interpretations" seems to be very promising. However, it can carry some significant amendments into educational practice if we first accept responsibility for the world we share *with others* so that all processes of assessment and selection would be well grounded and justified. Then the danger of "saturation" or "enclosure" will not be a real one anymore.

From a point of view of philosophical hermeneutics "hermeneutical

surplus” does not originate in “a mix” of interpretations but rather in the intersubjective potential that a work of art or just a text opens up for a reader.<sup>5</sup> A plethora of possible interpretations is not a deviation that we should be afraid of but a natural aspect of everyday life where people choosing different walks of life come up with their own idiosyncratic meanings. The question is how to teach students to make good interpretative choices and direct their activities towards ideas that really make sense and at the same time support their ability to respect those who are fundamentally different, to the extent that conflict between them is unavoidable. As we know from the history of ideas, finding a happy medium is possible, but it requires constant striving for better and more insightful, thoughtful understanding. In contemporary societies the ability to withdraw and dwell in a more contemplative style is not a common thing. Nowadays time becomes the most expensive commodity in all spheres of life, including school organization. But schools, by definition, should offer playful and joyful activities where students could concentrate on their personal interests and not only on social expectations. Schools can create the atmosphere where students can authentically express their own concerns and potentials. The lack of such conditions is a reason for a serious revision of schools and their current orientations. Thus the gap in collective hermeneutical resources can be overcome and schools can become the right place for such overcoming.

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## REFERENCES

- 1 See Paul Ricoeur, “Between Text and Its Reader” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 390-423.
- 2 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, New Dehli, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013), 401-407.
- 3 See Rafał Godoń, “Pedagogy, Learning and Becoming Oneself” in *Defending the Value of Education as a Public Good: Philosophical Dialogues on Education and the State*, ed. Katarzyna Wrońska and Julian Stern (London: Routledge, 2024), 145-158.

4 Kevin Klein-Cardena, "Epistemic Trouble: Fanon, Everyday Aesthetics and Hermeneutical Enclosure," *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.050>.

5 See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 55-57.