
INTERPRETATION AND STUDENT AGENCY

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An important and yet unresolved question has concerned the educational community for generations: what is the role of student agency and how do we take it into account as educators? Should we assume that students are already rational human agents and give them the responsibility to act as they see fit, or is it necessary to impose structure and deny certain freedoms so as to form their undeveloped rational capacities into those of the mature adult? Historically, this question has been reflected in the debate between traditional and progressive education; the former assumes an undeveloped capacity for agency, while the latter places student agency at the center of education. The two educational paradigms find themselves in direct opposition. Traditionalists claim that students are incapable of true agency, not knowing where their interests lie yet, while progressivists argue that the students are the most qualified to know their own interests and that educational providers are the ones incapable of knowing what is good for and in the interest of the students.

If we take the Deweyan position that the dichotomy between traditional and progressive education is one based on false dualisms, then the solution to the problem of student agency lies in the resolution or collapse of this dichotomy and the dualisms it entails. One such dualism central to the question of student agency is that of the child (agent) and the curriculum (structure). As Dewey maintains, when we're thinking of the child and the curriculum as separate, we falsely declare the two entities to be incommensurable, which then forces us to choose which one we value more and to place all the emphasis on that one.¹ In reality, though, the child and the curriculum are two interlinked aspects of the same process—education. The child's experience already involves elements—albeit unsophisticated—of the subjects constituting the curriculum, while the subjects are products of processes that are present and active within the child's lived experience.² Hence, education necessitates the reconciliation of these two aspects through synthesis rather than division, a synthesis that occurs through the process of interpretation. Interpretation for Dewey functions as a mediator in negotiations between the child and the curriculum. It links the subject matter in the curriculum to the child's experience in a dynamic fashion, characterized by

¹ John Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum," in *John Dewey, The Middle Works, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 2, 1902–1903 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 273–77.

² *Ibid.*, 277–78.

“continuous reconstruction” rather than rigidity, and allows for responsiveness to changes in the child’s experience.³

In Dewey’s reconciliation between child and curriculum lies the answer to the question about the role of student agency in education. I believe that his emphasis on the role of interpretation deserves closer consideration as it provides a means for preserving student agency. I begin by discussing the philosophical underpinnings of agency and the peculiarities of student agency specifically. Then, I apply these on a Deweyan framework for interpretation and explain how this framework constitutes a valid approach for fostering student agency. Finally, I present two possible ways of improving our interpretive practices in an effort to demonstrate the framework’s applicability.

THE NATURE OF STUDENT AGENCY

To determine whether an action involved agency or not, one needs to address two central questions: (1) Did the agent perform the given action? (2) If so, did she intend to perform it? It seems intuitively true that a necessary condition for an action to involve agency is that both of these questions need to be answered affirmatively.⁴ However, I would like to argue that these two presuppositions need not be present for agency to manifest.

Regarding the first question, it is important to realize that agency is not always exclusively associated with the individual who acts. That is to say, one can be the agent of an action she did not perform herself. Although this might seem counterintuitive, what is meant becomes more evident when we look at the bigger picture of human action. In many cases, actions require people other than their agent to be initiated, and, in fact, most actions necessitate the involvement of more than one person to take place. Albert Bandura elucidates this point by distinguishing three different forms of agency: personal, proxy, and collective agency.⁵ Bandura’s theory emphasizes that human agency in reality is seldom manifested as action of the individual alone. Because of the social environment we inhabit, most of the time people either act together with others (collective agency) or they delegate something that they wish to be done (proxy agency) to

³ Ibid.

⁴ Most philosophers of action agree with these two premises, notwithstanding their disagreement about what these premises entail. See for example: Alfred R. Mele, ed., *The Philosophy of Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), particularly Essay 3. See also the distinction between behavior and action in D. C. Phillips and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Postpositivism and Educational Research* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 68–72.

⁵ Albert Bandura, “Exercise of Human Agency Through Collective Efficacy,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 9, no. 3 (2000): 75–76; Albert Bandura, “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 1, no. 2 (2006): 165–66.

people “who have the resources, *knowledge*, and means to act on their behalf to secure the outcomes they desire.”⁶

Regarding the second question on intentionality, there are two things we need to consider according to Donald Davidson: whether the action is *aligned* with the agent’s dispositions, desires, needs, principles, etc., and whether the agent *believes* that the action is indeed aligned with or was instigated by said dispositions. Davidson refers to these two elements as the “pro-attitude” and “belief” of the agent, and together they constitute the “primary reason” for performing an action.⁷ If an action was initiated by the individual’s pro-attitudes and she believes that it was indeed so, then the individual can be said to have acted for a reason, which indicates the presence of intentionality⁸ as well as the existence of a causal relationship between the reason why an action was performed and the action itself.⁹ This, in turn, indicates the manifestation of agentive power with regard to the action performed.

However, this is not always the case and, especially when it comes to children, these two conditions can hardly be met simultaneously. Children often act impulsively and in ways that are counter to their own needs or long-term desires. Moreover, even when they do act on the basis of their needs and desires, they are not always capable of understanding that they are in fact doing so, let alone providing a satisfactory account for their actions to others or to themselves. Hence, it is an obvious problem that agency, when it comes to students, can never be actualized in the way it is actualized in adults. It is essentially here that traditional education finds justification for imposing a rigid curriculum and disciplinary system extrinsic to the student, claiming that teachers know better, and here lies the main weakness of progressive education, which tends to equate absolute freedom to rational agency.

INTERPRETATION AND THE TEACHER AS PROXY AGENT

Dewey offers a solution to this problematic and discusses how teachers can intervene without sacrificing the agentive power of the student. This solution is *interpretation*.¹⁰ Dewey employs the term “interpretation” in some of his most seminal works on education, but most importantly in “The Child and the Curriculum.”¹¹ Numerous scholars have addressed the subject of Dewey’s notion

⁶ Bandura, “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency,” 165, emphasis added.

⁷ Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” in *The Philosophy of Action*, ed. Alfred R. Mele (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27–28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ As Davidson shows, interpretation is a central aspect of agency when it comes to identifying the reason why someone acted as she did. In an attempt to provide an account of her action, she interprets the action and, based on said interpretation, redescribes it, thereby providing an explanation for it.

¹¹ See also, for example: John Dewey, “Interest in Relation to Training of the Will,” “My Pedagogical Creed,” and “The Psychological Aspect of the School Curriculum,” in

of interpretation—albeit in different contexts—with highly diverse commentaries ranging from sympathetic to thoroughly uncharitable.¹² For example, Mark Jonas discusses the ambiguous usage of the terms “definition” and “interpretation” in Dewey’s early work on interest and claims it suggests a “one-on-one correspondence between our interests and the impulses which created them,” an ambiguity that Dewey’s later work on interest cleared up.¹³ In a similar context, Paul Fairfield explains that for Dewey, interests are to be “interpreted” in terms of what they can potentially produce.¹⁴ Jim Garrison adds another dimension to Deweyan interpretation and presents it as an outgrowth of “moral perception,” an imaginative practice necessary for adequately assessing students’ best potentials, desires, and needs.¹⁵ In a completely different spirit, Sharon Feiman-Nemser discusses Dewey’s emphasis on “observation and interpretation” as necessary aspects of a teacher education centered around experimentalist and inquiry-based values.¹⁶ On the uncharitable side of the spectrum lies Harry Wells, who completely disregards the pregnant notion of interpretation that Dewey so persistently uses and suggests that deciphering the interests and instincts of the child constitutes a means of concealed “bourgeois indoctrination.”¹⁷

Though it is not in the purview of this paper to provide a comprehensive account of Dewey’s notion of interpretation, I do seek to focus on what I believe to be its neglected pedagogical implications—that is to say, interpretation as the element that links the two worlds of traditional and progressive education, as well as child and curriculum. D. C. Phillips has discussed interpretation within this particular context, declaring that the key to interpretation for Dewey is having in mind “the end point.”¹⁸ Indeed, for Dewey, when a teacher interprets

John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 5, 1895–1898 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

¹² The list of works I will mention is far from exhaustive but it is indicative of the variability of accounts that exist on Dewey’s notion of interpretation.

¹³ Mark Jonas, “Dewey’s Conception of Interest and its Significance for Teacher Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 2 (2011): 120–23.

¹⁴ Paul Fairfield, *Education After Dewey* (London: Continuum, 2009), 68.

¹⁵ Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 170–71.

¹⁶ Sharon Feiman-Nemser, “A Teacher Educator Looks at *Democracy and Education*,” in *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement with Dewey’s Democracy and Education*, ed. David T. Hansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 137–38.

¹⁷ Harry K. Wells, *Pragmatism: Philosophy of Imperialism* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 84–85. Larry Hickman discusses this account as one of many misinterpretations of Dewey’s works in “Socialization, Social Efficiency, and Social Control: Putting Pragmatism to Work,” in *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement with Dewey’s Democracy and Education*, ed. David T. Hansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 73.

¹⁸ D. C. Phillips, “John Dewey’s The Child and the Curriculum: A Century Later,” *The Elementary School Journal* 98, no. 5 (1998): 409–10.

the needs, potentialities, or desires of a student (his pro-attitudes, to use Davidson's language), she sees the *direction* that these are capable of taking. By seeing this direction, in turn, she is capable of guiding the student by pointing him to the subject matter most relevant and necessary for him to reach an end that is uniquely his and not one ascribed by an imposed and impersonal curriculum.¹⁹ The teacher, in this sense, acts as a more knowledgeable proxy agent who initiates an action on behalf of the student or suggests a course of action based on the student's pro-attitudes. In contrast, making an unwarranted assumption about the student's needs does not take into account his pro-attitudes and, hence, disregards the agent's intentions. A necessary component of proxy agency in the context of education involves interpretation of the input received from the student so as to determine his unique pro-attitudes, the attitudes that would have guided his action if he were capable to make these connections and guide his own actions; viz., if he had the experience to know what a specific disposition signifies, or what course of action could potentially satisfy a given need.

As a proxy agent, therefore, the teacher assumes the responsibility of interpretation of the child's pro-attitudes, since the child, as mentioned above, is not always capable of realizing what these indicate and, consequently, what course of action would allow him to satisfy his needs in accordance with the pro-attitudes that begot them. However, it is important to keep in mind that this interpretation is not binding or limiting in the sense that someone tries to interpret a text, assuming that the interpreter is an intentionalist in search of the one correct interpretation. Like Jonas contends, there is no tight "correspondence" between a student's pro-attitudes and the subject matter in the curriculum. Rather, the pro-attitudes open up possibilities that can potentially lead to multiple directions—and *will* lead depending on who the teacher is, given that interpretation is not an objective process, but rather is contingent on the interpreter as much as it is on the individual being interpreted.²⁰ David Hansen articulates this fact astutely when he says that Dewey does not want teachers "to fixate on who students are apart from subject matter," for students are not fixed entities whose essence the teacher is trying to uncover. Rather they are unique individuals whose unique interaction with every teacher can unlock hidden potentialities and create new "conditions for growth."²¹

The kind of agency that interpretation generates also forces us to reconsider our understanding of intention as something that directly originates from the student, for it is not only action that can manifest indirectly in the form of proxy agency but also intentionality. Both action and intentionality can come to be directly expressed by the teacher, the former through guidance and the latter

¹⁹ Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum," 279, 281.

²⁰ Jonas, "Dewey's Conception of Interest," 125–26.

²¹ David T. Hansen, "Dewey's Book of the Moral Self," in *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement with Dewey's Democracy and Education*, ed. David T. Hansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 177.

through interpretation. The teacher assumes the role of *interpreter* and *guide* of the student by virtue of possessing the experiential knowledge necessary to understand what the student's behavior, verbal expression, and experiences *intend* to disclose. In that sense, the teacher's experiential knowledge renders him more suitable to articulate the student's intentions than the student herself. Proxy agency, thus, takes a new dimension; the individual does not just express her already-known intentions to someone capable of taking action on her behalf, but rather she indicates intentions she is not explicitly aware of and which only a person with experience can understand and reconstruct. Why can the teacher understand the student better than the student herself? The answer is simple and intuitive. The student, lacking knowledge and an understanding of the world and her developing self, struggles to interpret what these indications signify. The trained teacher, on the other hand, has experienced, either personally or through acquired knowledge, these indications as outcomes of a process of maturation and he knows what they might look like when manifested prematurely in the student.²² This is not to say that interpretation can ever be infallible, yet there are certainly ways to meliorate our interpretations, as will be discussed later in this paper.

One important consideration arises here. If the teacher bears responsibility for identifying the pro-attitudes of the student and interpreting what they mean, then it is necessary that he also believes that the actions he stimulates the student to perform are aligned with the student's pro-attitudes. This condition must be satisfied for his guidance to be effective and advantageous for the student. If this be the case, however, the question arises as to whether true agency necessitates that the student also believes in the alignment of her pro-attitudes with the teacher-stimulated actions she must engage in. This is a valid concern since it seems counterintuitive that the student's agency can truly be respected if she does not believe that certain activities are properly beneficial or desirable. In actuality, complete neglect of the student's beliefs runs the risk of reducing the process to some form of paternalism analogous to the one exhibited by traditional educators. As Garrison reminds us, even the most sympathetic and empathetic teachers face the danger of imposing their own unreflective interpretations on their students, and so good will on its own is not sufficient for proxy agency to be present.²³

With these thoughts in mind, it is clear that the element of trust between teacher and student is paramount for the instigation of interpretive proxy agency, a trust that can only be fostered through open communication. Teacher-student communication need not be limited to the teacher's acquisition of necessary information from the student for the purpose of understanding her better. Rather, true communication is bidirectional; viz., the teacher needs to disclose and

²² Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum," 282–83, 291; Dewey, *Experience and Education*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 13, 1938–1939 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 21.

²³ Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 175–76.

discuss his beliefs with the student, especially regarding possible courses of action, and address any concerns that may arise. Such a dialogical approach, apart from elucidating the educative process for the student, can help counterpoise—to a certain extent—the power imbalance inherent in the teacher-student relationship by turning it into one involving more transparency, trust, and mutual respect. Under these conditions the teacher is not, so to speak, working behind the student’s back, but rather respects her opinion and creates space for its expression. The process of fostering such a relationship is not devoid of complications and pitfalls, yet it is a step toward the right direction if we are to nurture student agency.

THE STUDENT AS SELF-INTERPRETING BEING

To further elucidate the relation between interpretation and agency, I will bring into the discussion one important aspect: that humans are self-interpreting beings.²⁴ A person’s self-concept is constructed through the way she perceives herself based on a combination of internal processes and feedback she receives from her environment. According to Charles Taylor, we make meaning of our surroundings and ourselves by interpreting the messages we receive through language, both verbal and non-verbal.²⁵ Moreover, making meaning presupposes that we already have a point of view and, therefore, our meaning-making in a particular situation occurs in relation to other already acquired meanings.²⁶ This means that human beings, due to different experiences, interpret the same situations in different ways, and the same holds for students and teachers.

Because language, in a broad sense, is the only form through which we communicate and make meaning, understanding ourselves requires language. This is especially true for language-dependent feelings. A feeling such as anger can be said to exist in nature outside of an explicitly human language, since we encounter it in beings with no linguistic capacity. However, when concepts such as human dignity come into play our understanding of a particular situation becomes more refined and anger gets transformed into the more nuanced feeling of indignation.²⁷ In this manner, the way we perceive situations and give them meaning allows us to understand ourselves and our thoughts, our experiences and our reactions to them, and what all that says about who we are. This process of self-interpretation is never finalized and, hence, our self is always in the making.

²⁴ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers: Vol. 1, Human Agency and Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45–76.

²⁵ See for example: Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*; Taylor, *Philosophical Papers: Vol. 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

²⁶ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 22.

²⁷ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 45–76, 260–63.

As educators, we try to understand students and their actions, to make sense of what these signify, and to develop an understanding about who they are. This is something that happens automatically, and, given the necessity of preexisting meaning for understanding, our prejudgments are always at play. Therefore, it is important for teachers to become mindful of this process of interpretation and do their best to understand students, rejecting prejudices that might cloud their judgments. Misinterpretations of students can lead to unjust treatments of them and, even worse, to the internalization of said misinterpretations by the students who might perceive them as accurate.²⁸ Students' unique experiences can lead to behaviors that manifest in what are perceived to be disruptive ways. Automatically labeling the students as disruptive, without first inquiring into and interpreting these unique experiences on valid grounds, is not only ethically questionable but also dangerous for the students.²⁹ It might persuade the students to label themselves as misbehaving, disruptive, etc., and this can have negative consequences to their development as students and as human beings, in the form of self-fulfilling prophecies and more. Research in labeling illustrates the reality and severity of labeling practices, whether the labels are substantiated or not.³⁰

²⁸ Empirical research conducted within the last couple of decades provides support to the symbolic interactionist thesis that students are indeed likely to internalize others' (including teachers') interpretations of themselves. These interpretations are referred to as reflected appraisals. See for example: Heather A. Bouchey and Susan Harter, "Reflected Appraisals, Academic Self-Perceptions, and Math/Science Performance During Early Adolescence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 97, no. 4 (2005): 673–86; Jennifer H. Pfeifer, Carrie L. Masten, Larissa A. Borofsky, Mirella Dapretto, Andrew J. Fuligni, and Matthew D. Lieberman, "Neural Correlates of Direct and Reflected Self-Appraisals in Adolescents and Adults: When Social Perspective Taking Informs Self-Perceptions," *Child Development* 80, no. 4 (2009): 1016–38; Cécille Nurra and Pascal Pansu, "The Impact of Significant Others' Actual Appraisals on Children's Self-Perceptions: What About Cooley's Assumption for Children?" *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 24, no. 2 (2009): 247–62.

²⁹ Russell Skiba et al. have found that African American students are referred for infractions that involve "a good deal more subjective judgment on the part of the referring agent" than infractions white students are referred for, such as being disrespectful. However, what a white teacher considers disrespectful may differ substantially from what an African American teacher considers disrespectful. Similarly, what a middle-class teacher considers disrespectful may differ from what a lower-class teacher considers disrespectful. Cultural and class differences affect one's interpretations and judging a student on one's own terms instead of on the student's terms may constitute an injustice. Russell J. Skiba, Robert S. Michael, Abra Carroll Nardo, and Reece L. Peterson, "The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment," *The Urban Review* 34, no. 4 (2002): 334.

³⁰ For more on labeling, see: Ross L. Matsueda, "Reflected Appraisals, Parental Labeling, and Delinquency: Specifying a Symbolic Interactionist Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 6 (1992): 1577–1611; Jón Gunnar Bernburg, "Labeling Theory," in *Handbook on Crime and Deviance*, eds. Marvin D. Krohn, Alan J. Lizotte, and Gina Penly Hall (New York: Springer, 2009), 187–207; Brianna L. Kennedy-Lewis

Many will argue that it is impossible for teachers to dedicate time or effort in assessing every behavior or every student's unique experiences individually and with equal attention. Of course, no one would deny that this is the case. However, it is imperative that we understand the importance of interpretation in the educational process. Increased awareness might then lead to modification of present teaching conditions to conditions more conducive to mindful interpretation.

IMPROVING OUR INTERPRETATIONS

Until the conditions of schooling change, however, we can consider ways of improving the process of interpretation and consequently increasing student agency in education. In this light, I propose two suggestions that I believe are feasible within the current educational paradigm. Each of these suggestions focuses on one of the two fundamental axes around which the interpretive process in the classroom needs to be focused: the student and the teacher.

REGARDING THE STUDENT

An important component for improving interpretation involves increasing the students' self-interpreting skills, which involves increasing understanding of their surroundings and ability to express their perspectives. I believe that this can be most effectively accomplished through the expansion of student vocabulary. By this I do not mean to refer to rote memorization of definitions, which I believe would be useless. Substantial vocabulary expansion occurs through exposure to unknown words and concepts within the contexts in which they are naturally used. E. D. Hirsh has been a proponent of this sort of policy since the publication of his book *Cultural Literacy* thirty years ago, and I believe that focusing on the expansion of vocabulary in the way he suggests can be very beneficial for students.³¹ Learning how the same words are used in different contexts develops a more nuanced understanding of these words. Students come to organically understand what they hear around them, and they can also present a richer understanding of their own situation both to themselves and to others (for example their teachers).

To explain why this is desirable I will employ Dewey's distinction between "active" and "passive" vocabulary. Active vocabulary refers to words that we use actively and "intelligently." Passive vocabulary, on the other hand, is composed of words that we understand when we encounter them in a text or

and Amy S. Murphy, "Listening to 'Frequent Flyers': What Persistently Disciplined Students Have to Say About Being Labeled as 'Bad,'" *Teachers College Record* 118, no. 1 (2016): 1–40.

³¹ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 134–45; Hirsch, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 144–50; Hirsch, *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 58–67.

conversation, but are incapable of using on our own, either due to lack of practicing their usage or lack of a precise grasp of their meaning. For Dewey having a much larger passive than active vocabulary is the effect of schooling that focuses on decontextualized acquisition of vocabulary and lack of opportunities for usage.³² This leads to constraints in children’s ways of thinking and does not allow them to employ the new words they have learned to refine their understanding of their own environment as well as their self-understanding. Vocabulary skills should not be learned in the abstract and for the purposes of recitation and use in class discussions limited to specific school topics. Rather, vocabulary should be rendered comprehensible to the extent that it becomes “a conscious tool of conveying knowledge and assisting thought.”³³ By expanding vocabulary while simultaneously transforming it into a conscious tool, students become better self-interpreters and articulators of their feelings, situations, and justifications. This affords students greater degrees of agency both in terms of increasing self-understanding—hence, not relying on potential teacher misinterpretations to explain their own actions—and in terms of increasing ability to accurately articulate their views to the teacher—thereby decreasing the possibility of error in teachers’ interpretations.

REGARDING THE TEACHER

The second and perhaps more important axis of classroom interpretation is the teacher. I assign the role of teacher greater importance because the teacher is in charge of the student’s education and, therefore, the teacher is accountable not only for her own interpretations but also, to some degree, those of the students. I refer back to the potential for harm mentioned earlier, a potential that is unavoidable due to the student’s lack of experience in interpreting situations. There are cases when students are unable to interpret their own actions, that is, to rationalize or provide a justification for why they acted the way they did.³⁴ This does not mean that there was no agency involved when these actions were performed, notwithstanding the students’ inability to provide justification. It is up to the teacher to discover the missing links that will present a coherent interpretation—one that takes into account all aspects of the situation, and, thus, does not unfairly reduce any inappropriate or undesirable behavior to the condemnatory category of “misbehavior.” Having an open channel of communication between the teacher and the student once again becomes necessary, albeit in the context of acquiring necessary information. Furthermore, an open channel of communication between teacher and the student’s

³² John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 8, 1933 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 309–10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁴ See, for example, Christopher Emdin’s account from his childhood experience in *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y’all Too* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 21–22.

surrounding environment (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family members, or friends) may also be appropriate or even necessary. Recent literature in “culturally responsive” teaching provides an excellent account for how engagement in the students’ lives and communities can help mitigate the possibility for misinterpretations.³⁵ Nonetheless, having the totality of information does not in and of itself guarantee a correct interpretation, even though it decreases the possibility of error. There is still the role of prejudices to contend with.

Prejudices play the most important role when we interpret something.³⁶ They create a filter or horizon (to use Gadamer’s term) through which we come to understand. One can also think of this in terms of the surrounding meanings against which new meaning is created. These prejudices might not necessarily be erroneous. In fact, they may even be at the heart of the matter. We cannot, nonetheless, leave our prejudices unchecked and our interpretations to chance. This is, of course, easier said than done. As we know from the study of hermeneutics, most attempts to come up with an objective mode of interpretation collapsed within their own prejudices. The best we can hope for is an adequate inter-subjective interpretation. To achieve such an inter-subjective understanding there needs to be a “fusion of horizons,”³⁷ which, in the context of the classroom, would involve the teacher absorbing the horizon of the student, and, thus, expanding her own horizon and grasping the student’s self-understanding.³⁸ When one tries to do this, her prejudices come to the forefront and, at that point, she needs to test them and see whether they are conducive to understanding (i.e., present a more plausible interpretation) or not. Accordingly, each tested prejudice will either be retained, if it assisted with the interpretive process, or rejected, if it obstructed it. Consequently, grasping the student’s self-understanding involves a change in the teacher’s own self-understanding (in the form of her prejudices).

This is a far from straightforward process and I cannot claim to have found any undisputable solutions. However, Taylor might be of help again in facilitating this process. He suggests that when it comes to understanding, the only way to avoid either thinking that we can easily understand someone’s

³⁵ See Carla R. Monroe, “Misbehavior or Misinterpretation?” *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 42, no. 4 (2006): 161–65. On culturally responsive classroom management, see: Carol S. Weinstein, Sandra Tomlinson-Clarke, and Mary Curran, “Toward a Conception of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 55, no. 1 (2004): 25–38; and H. Richard Milner, IV and F. Blake Tenore, “Classroom Management in Diverse Classrooms,” *Urban Education* 45, no. 5 (2010): 560–603.

³⁶ I use the word prejudice here in the well-known Gadamerian sense of prejudgment; viz., I am not necessarily ascribing to it the negative connotation that it usually carries. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 283.

³⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 317.

³⁸ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 117.

perspective through our own, or thinking that there is no way of ever understanding it, is to introduce a third perspective. Being influenced by Wittgenstein and many of his predecessors, Taylor believes that when we participate in language we are part of a distinct *language game* or *form of life* and this reflects our world-view or our inter-subjective understanding of the world. In that sense, when we try to understand someone else's viewpoint we need to understand the language game in which they are participating. This, however, is impossible because the only way of perceiving another language game is through our own language game. For this reason, Taylor introduces a third language that he refers to as the "language of perspicuous contrast." According to Taylor, in such a language "the possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form of life [or language game] and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternative such variations."³⁹ This way they can both be judged on a third level, neutral to both language games. Such a language would work by opposing both the points of view of the teacher and the student and, thus, placing them into a third language game which would expose their merits and inadequacies.⁴⁰

A brief example can illustrate how this could take place. Traditional and progressive educators have constantly maintained opposing views with regard to good learning practices. The former suggest that studying is the best, if not the only, way to acquire substantial knowledge, while the latter suggest that it is playing freely and learning from one's environment. The language of contrast would oppose both these views and find the usefulness in the opposing sides. For example, studying is not the only way to learn; making a bridge out of sand on the beach might teach a child practically about the properties of a bridge, especially when she succeeds after implementing adjustments prompted by previous failed attempts. On the other hand, play-based learning is not always possible or even desirable. For example, students need to know historical facts to understand the significance of current events, and such facts cannot be learned through play. Therefore, a third contrasting language demonstrates that play might be a better way for acquiring practical knowledge, but studying is also necessary for acquiring useful knowledge which exists only in books.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The two suggestions I mentioned show possible ways to improve our interpretive practices and, thereby, become more effective at fostering and strengthening student agency in education. However, my purpose in this paper was not to provide solid foundations or a policy proposal for a new system of education. Rather, I aimed to clarify the importance of interpretation when it

³⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 123–30.

⁴¹ Ibid., 129. This example is a variation of the example provided by Taylor to describe the language of perspicuous contrast in action. The reason why I altered the example is to have it fit better within the context of my own inquiry.

comes to education and specifically explain why it is the only means for actualizing student agency. In doing so, I used the two suggestions to illustrate that there are conceivable ways of addressing this issue. This country's educational system was built on the principles of creating free, responsible citizens, capable of making informed and rational decisions, and this involves nurturing rather than stultifying their agency from an early age. Constant imposition or unlimited and unguided freedom are not effective solutions, as both the traditional and progressive movements have shown. What we need to start thinking about and concentrating our efforts on is interpretation.
