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Phenomenology in Pedagogical Settings. Overview of the current discourse on phenomenological pedagogy

Summary

Phenomenology has been well-received in pedagogy from the very beginning. With direct reference to Husserl, Aloys Fischer calls for a Descriptive Pedagogy. Only on the basis of a close description of educational processes similar to the phenomenological reduction can the educational sciences rediscover their actual subject matter. In this article the author traces the development of phenomenological thought in educational theory with a special focus on the notions of corporeality and negativity. As a necessary condition of perception in general, corporeality constitutes an important factor in the structural being-to-the-world of the human being. Apart from being able to sense its surroundings the body can also be perceived as part of these surroundings. Due to this double role, the subject opens up to foreign influences and negativity. Thus, the other plays an important role in the constitution of the identity of the subject. Through corporeality, a sphere of intersubjectivity is opened up. A recapitulation of Käte Meyer-Drawe's Pedagogy of Inter-Subjectivity and Wilfried Lippitz' Theory of *Bildung* and Alterity shows how these thoughts can be made useful for pedagogical discussion. Hereby, sociality and alterity prove to be foundational categories for educational settings in general. Finally, the author gives an outlook on current developments in phenomenological pedagogy.

Key words: phenomenology; negativity; corporeality; negative identity; phenomenological pedagogy; descriptive pedagogy

Phenomenology influenced scientific debates far beyond the philosophical discipline right from the beginning. To this day, research on cognitive science,

for example, operates with the term 'embodied cognition' (Fingerhut et al., 2013; Haugeland, 1997). Cognitive features that for a long time were addressed separately from physical qualities are now considered to be deeply connected with the body. A similar development can be observed in the field of medicine. Especially psychology benefits from a phenomenological analysis of experiences. Within phenomenological psychopathology the brain loses its primacy and functions as a mediator that mediates interactions both within the human body and between the human body and its environment (Fuchs, 2018). The focus on the subject gives way to a new emphasis on intersubjective relations. In the pedagogical field this shift of attention leads to a new understanding of learning as an intersubjective experience (Meyer-Drawe, 2003). Today, phenomenological pedagogy constitutes a growing field of research which more and more engages in empirical research as well. In this article I want to trace the development of the mostly German-speaking reception of phenomenology for educational purposes. At first, Aloys Fischer's demand for a descriptive pedagogy (Fischer, 1914) is set against Edmund Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction and his criticism of the sciences (Husserl, 1913, 1936) (chapter 2). The main emphasis of the further overview is on the important notions of negativity and corporeality and their interconnectedness. By means of a selected introduction into the educational considerations of Otto Friedrich Bollnow (e.g. Bollnow, 1959) and Eugen Fink (e.g. Fink, 1989), the human being comes into view as fragmentary and exposed to experiences of negativity. This sphere of constant negativity seems to be closely linked to corporeality in general. An adequate handling of these circumstances has to include negativity as a central part of the self-concept as a negative identity (Thomas, 2006) (chapter 3). Further milestones in the development of phenomenological pedagogy can be seen in the contributions of Käte Meyer-Drawe and Wilfried Lippitz. Meyer-Drawe (1983) develops a pedagogy of the 'Third Path' beyond the traditional subject-object dualism. Instead, she wants to establish intersubjectivity as a foundational category of pedagogical reflection. Lippitz (2003a) puts his emphasis on the role of the other in educational processes. Thus, he too withdraws the subject from its central position and puts it in a sphere of interconnectedness (chapter 4). Finally, the current development of Phenomenological Pedagogy is among other things characterised by the tendency towards empirical research. After giving central examples I will conclude this article with a few remarks on the possibilities of phenomenological pedagogy in general.

Descriptive pedagogy and phenomenology

In 1914 Aloys Fischer publishes his article “Deskriptive Pädagogik” (“Descriptive Pedagogy”, transl. P.B.), which is usually understood as the starting point of the interdisciplinary connection of phenomenology and pedagogy. The demands Fischer makes are based on a fundamental criticism of the current state of educational sciences. More specifically, he criticises the way in which theoretical considerations are connected with the actual pedagogical practice. According to his view, theory currently has two main tasks. Firstly, to criticise the teaching practice. Secondly, to dictate what the teaching practice should actually look like. However, both approaches are not suitable to construct a coherent theory of education, because they lack the basis that needs to precede every theory: the description of the subject matter (cf. *ibid.*, p. 83). Whereas most pedagogues seem to be convinced to have a natural understanding of educational processes, Fischer shows that the subject matter can’t be clearly defined and that the description of educational processes stays way behind its requirements. Instead of ‘just knowing’, a full analysis of educational processes requires a special training. The pedagogue has to be able to give a description of what is happening in the student’s consciousness when he or she is interpreting a poem or solving a mathematical equation (cf. *ibid.*, p. 83). Thus, a trained “*psychologische und pädagogische Achtsamkeit*” (“psychological and pedagogical awareness”, transl. P.B.) is essential for forming a basis for further educational theory.

In the following, Fischer gives a detailed explanation of the different aspects that are relevant for a successful description of pedagogical contexts. Three specific questions shall function as a guideline within the search for the subject matter (cf. *ibid.*, p. 92). The first question a descriptive pedagogy has to answer is: What is given? Secondly, the focus is on the difference between the given subject matter and the way in which it is perceived: In which way is the specific subject matter given? This can for example mean that something can be seen, heard or meant. The third and last question is: in which position does the perceived subject matter stand to the perceiving subject? A complete pedagogical description in Fischer’s sense has to be able to answer to all three questions. Educational studies in general have to have these close descriptions as their foundations to be able to form adequate theoretical approaches to the given subject matter.

Fischer's demanded descriptive pedagogy then is to be understood as groundwork for educational science. Its main focus rests on a very detailed description of the subject matter in its relation to the perceiving subject and the way in which it is given. Only on this basis, an adequate evaluation of educational processes is possible.

As well as Fischer's descriptive pedagogy, Husserl's (1913, 1936) considerations on the necessity of phenomenology as a new method are derived from a fundamental criticism of the sciences. According to Husserl, modern sciences want to get an objectivistic grasp of the world. However, in this attempt the actual lifeworld gets put in the background. Yet there is no such thing as a total vacuum. Every scientific experiment needs a human being that designs and evaluates the experiment in the first place. Thus, the subject is always part of the experiment and part of the process of gaining knowledge. The famous call to get "*zurück zu den Sachen selbst*" ("back to the things themselves", transl. P.B.) formulates the demand to take the dependence on the pretheoretical lifeworld into account. Instead of trying to get to the essence of things by putting them out of context the researcher should rather focus on his or her perception of the things in their lifeworld, in their actual context and their connectedness to other things and to the perceiving subject. These assumptions mark the starting point for Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction (Husserl, 1913). Phenomenology seeks knowledge in immediately given appearances or rather: phenomena. According to Husserl, the formal description of these phenomena in their lifeworld should be the foundation of every science, therefore function as *prima philosophia*.

One central term within this endeavour is the intentionality of the consciousness. This describes the general directionality of the consciousness. Something is perceived as something. Through the act of perceiving (noesis) the perceived object is perceived in a certain way (noema). If, for example, someone dreams about a tree, the noesis of this perception would be the tree, whereas the noema would be the tree as dreamed. The actual essence of the perceived object remains hidden. This is due, among other things, to the fact that perception is always perspective perception. In order to get closer to the essence of the subject matter, different perspectives have to be imagined. In Husserl's terms, this constant changing between viewpoints is called the eidetic variation. Whereas the actual, empirical reception is always limited because of its perceptivity, the eidetic variation takes place within the endless possibilities of imagination. The central part then is to discover which constants

stay the same in every possible perspective, because these constants constitute the essence of the perceived thing. However, apart from the eidetic variation, Husserl established a similar method which was and still is of great importance for further phenomenological research: the phenomenological reduction. Within Husserl's considerations a phenomenological reduction consisting of two steps enables to reveal the essence of any given phenomenon. In a first step called epoché, subjective attitudes, theoretical presuppositions, and traditional knowledge have to be put aside. What follows next is the transcendental eidetic reduction in which the mere existence of the perceived object has to be put in brackets so that solemnly its essence remains. Although generously varied, Husserl's understanding of phenomenology still is a key reference for any further research with interest in a phenomenological approach.

Negative corporeality¹

The reason for the perspectivity of perception is that the corporeality of the perceiving subject functions as a necessary condition for perception. Every perception is corporeal, just as every corporeality is linked to certain limitations. When it comes to the role of the body in perceptive experiences within the phenomenological tradition, Maurice Merleau-Ponty must be named. His main work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) is based on the assumption that the approach of the human being to the world is always corporeal. This being-to-the-world can be seen as the incarnation of Husserl's intentional consciousness (cf. Ströker, 1989, p. 324). However, the term 'incarnation' might be misleading. Contrary to a traditional, Cartesian dualistic juxtaposition of mind and body, Merleau-Ponty establishes the term of the 'lived body' in which mental as well as physical qualities are inextricably linked. Therefore, the corporeal structures of Merleau-Ponty's being-to-the-world are to be understood as transcending the mere physical body. The lived body is set against an overemphasis of reason and rationality in linking them to corporeal structures.

Together with the directionality of the human being, which is expressed in its being-to-the-world, comes a new understanding of subjectivity in general. Just as the subject is open to the world through its lived body, the world

¹ For a broader overview of the development of phenomenological pedagogy in general apart from the notions 'corporeality' and 'negativity' cf. Brinkmann 2018.

extends into the subject. This reciprocal entanglement means that also a reciprocal influence is possible. Apart from natural and cultural influences, also 'the other' in form of another human being plays an important role in the constitution of a subject's identity. This shows that there is always a considerable amount of foreign influence within the self that lies outside its own reach. Within the structures of the self the other is always already implemented as an ineluctable reference (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 508). What appears to be negative at first sight, actually opens up a sphere of intersubjectivity. You can never fully understand another human being, but with the foreignness in yourself you can never fully understand yourself either (cf. Bermes, 2012, p. 96 f.).

One central component of the subject's corporeal structure is negativity. This negativity is the result of various spheres of influence that affect the subject's identity through the lived body without the possibility, however, to prevent these influences. The subject's identity is necessarily to some extent characterised by foreign influences that do not underlie its own choice. Regarding pedagogical studies, a focus on negativity as a central part of a subject's approach to the world proved to have fruitful implications for educational processes.

According to Eugen Fink (1989), negativity is an existential quality of experience. In its situatedness the subject is not complete but rather fragmentary. The self can only be experienced in combination with the world and the other. But also these experiences are always just fragmentary. Due to the upcoming interconnectedness between world, self, and other, all totalities break apart (cf. Brinkmann, 2016, p. 4). This new focus also influences the understanding of *Bildung* or education in so far as education comes into view as being fragmentary as well. In accordance with the general shift of attention away from the subject's inner consciousness towards an interconnected sphere of subject, world and other, negativity cannot be reduced to an operation of the consciousness. Instead, it is a central quality of experience. Therefore, every learning experience is accompanied with a certain degree of negativity as well. This not only applies to experiences in the educational field, but extends through various areas of life. Every experience is permeated by an existential negativity and opens up to an only fragmentary understanding. School education then can set itself the task of teaching ways to cope with this kind of negativity. One example for this is Philipp Thomas' (2006) concept of the 'negative identity'. Within philosophical education, Thomas demonstrates that

the idea of a self that constitutes itself is an illusion. Against the background of considerations about negativity in the 20th century, identity appears as 'negative identity'. Unavailability and an ineluctable influence of intersubjective structures on the subject's identity have to be taken into account when speaking of the self. A central part of a successful life praxis according to Thomas then consists in an acceptance of and reflection upon the structures of negativity in the own self. With regard to education and in accordance with Fink's considerations, any educational theory has to show difference and negativity as basis and possibility of inter- and intrasubjective communication, orientation and collective construction of meaning.

A similar approach is followed by the philosopher and pedagogue Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1959), who speaks of an education of discontinuity. His considerations are characterised by the fruitful connection of existential philosophy and pedagogy. Subsequent to the anthropological turn, he addresses the subject in its new understanding and draws conclusions thereof for necessary forms of education. Just like Fink, Bollnow understands negativity as an existential quality of human being-in-the-world. However, Bollnow focuses on a different aspect of negativity. Instead of addressing experience in general, he picks out different phenomena that are especially closely linked to an experience of negativity. These phenomena, for example crisis and failure, mark the main focus of Bollnow's education of discontinuity. Until today, failure plays an important role in the pedagogical discussion as a central part of the learning experience (cf. Rödel, 2015; Koller/Rieger-Ladich, 2013; Breil, 2019). Despite gainful reflections on negative experiences, the anthropological account of his considerations does not fit today's understanding of subjectivity being constituted by various influencing factors outside its own consciousness. Instead, modern phenomenological and pedagogical approaches give up the central position of the human subject. With the resulting focus on the interconnectedness of self, world, and other, phenomenological pedagogy emphasises the growing importance of an adequate relation between individuals and their surroundings.

Intersubjectivity and Foreignness

In her habilitation "Corporeality and Sociality" from the year 1983, Meyer-Drawe develops a pedagogy of the 'Third Path' that is based on a broad

reception of the philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty among others. The aim of these considerations is to establish intersubjectivity as foundational category of pedagogical reflection (Meyer-Drawe, 1983, p. 215). Regarding communication, intersubjectivity means that everyone who is part of a conversation is also part in the constitution of meaning. Contrary to a one-sided instruction, teaching processes then can be understood as reciprocal or two-sided. What the teacher says as well as what the students hear is a central component of the mediation in every lesson. The same holds true for concrete bodily interactions. An originally intended meaning of a gesture can change depending on the various interpretations of all involved individuals. Due to the intersubjective structure of communication or rather of the constitution of meaning in general, the teaching process comes into view as always being partly out of control. Thus, negativity shows as a central category in Meyer-Drawe's considerations as well. The manifold interconnectedness between human being, other and world leads to a structure such complex that the typically anthropocentric idea of an autonomous subject can be identified as an illusion. Instead of focusing on the extremes – either full autonomy or complete heteronomy – educational theory should rather begin to focus on a possible reciprocal interconnectedness (cf. Rieger-Ladich, 2002). In this respect, the subject can be seen as both autonomous and heteronomous. Self- and foreign determination are two factors in the constitution of the subject's identity. With regard to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Meyer-Drawe uses the expression of an "anonymous collectivity" (Meyer-Drawe, 1983, p. 175). Due to the fact that the subject's identity is influenced by its surroundings, Meyer-Drawe thinks of sociality as being prior to individuality. Before their particular individuality the individuals exist amidst an anonymous collectivity from which they arise as individuals. Sociality comes before individuality and has its roots in the shared corporeal structures of the human being-to-the-world. Given that meaning constitutes itself through the back and forth in an inter-subjective sphere, meaning is necessarily a product of co-constitution. Living in a meaningful world then means that every human being is always already social. Education does not take place in private, in a single person's consciousness, but it rather evolves in the dynamic structures between self, world and other. The same applies to the concept of learning. If learning is to be understood as an experience (cf. Meyer-Drawe, 2003), this experience affects this very interconnectedness of self, world and other. Namely in such a way that these structures and therefore the self and its identity reorganise

themselves. Learning then means a reorganisation of the structures of one's corporeal being-to-the-world (cf. Meyer-Drawe, 1982). Because every change in these structures means a different and new corporeal access to the world, learning takes part in the constitution of the subject's identity. Meyer-Drawe wants to establish inter-subjectivity as a foundational category of educational reflection. With that she wants to raise the awareness for the complexity of educational processes and for the fellow students as being part of the constitution of meaning in class.

For Wilfried Lippitz too, the sphere of intersubjectivity plays an important role. He puts his main focus on the role of the other in experience (Lippitz, 2003a, 2008). After Meyer-Drawe stated that all learning is experience, Lippitz now shows that all experience is experience of the foreign in two ways (cf. Lippitz, 2003a, p. 91 ff.). Based on the example of raising a newborn baby, Lippitz illustrates the two dimensions of foreignness as follows. Confronted with something entirely new, in this case an entirely new person, the first kind of foreignness lies in the child itself. Suddenly, the parents are faced with incomprehensible cries that they cannot understand yet. Only in the course of familiarisation or de-alienation, the barriers of understanding will be taken down slowly. With every stage of development, the child becomes less foreign. The second dimension of foreignness aims backwards. What once seemed familiar is suddenly becoming strange and alien. In the confrontation with the other the own lifestyle for example stops to feel natural and comes into view as merely being trained over time. Facing this dimension of foreignness, the own ways of life all of a sudden call for an explanation and justification. According to Lippitz, foreignness works both ways. An experience of the foreign does not just affect the experiencing subject, but also the way it responds to its environment. Applied to school contexts these classifications lead to the conclusion that educational processes seem to focus merely on one dimension of the experience of the foreign. Namely, the development of the students towards a well-functioning member of society tries to work against the foreignness of the not yet adapted behaviours of the individuals. At no time does the second dimension of foreignness play any role. In general, education is understood as de-alienation. In search for an answer to the question why it has to be that way, Lippitz suspects what he calls a 'colonialist understanding' (Lippitz 2003a, p. 104) to be the main motivation. Herein, an understanding of the foreign is necessary in order to be able to influence it. However, in this framework the nature of the child appears as deficient. The child is

nothing more than not yet grown-up. In contrast to that idea, Lippitz wants to appreciate the childishness in its own value. In doing so, the second dimension of foreignness automatically comes into view as well. Apart from influencing the students, their rationality can be used as an opportunity to reconsider one's own way of thinking. According to Lippitz, foreign experience needs to be understood as dialogical interaction that includes mutual understanding as well as reflective alienation. It's about speaking to and not about the other.

Following the discourse up to this point, the leading areas of focus can be pointed out quite easily. For one thing, the sphere of intersubjectivity, dialogue and the co-constitution of meaning are getting more important. The other is acknowledged as a central part of educational processes who is foreign but not threatening. Secondly, learning works both ways. Both student and teacher learn from another in class. Corporeality and negativity form two basic categories for these assumptions.

Current Discourse

In the current discourse of phenomenological pedagogy similar topics are of great importance. Ursula Stenger, for example, focuses on educational processes of small children in day-care and kindergarten (Stenger, 2015). One main focus of her studies is the 'creative experience'. The creative moment in experience can be found in the reorganisation of the subject's access to the world when confronted with the other, the foreign. A major emphasis on the role of corporeal experiences in learning processes can be found in Kristin Westphal's considerations. According to her view, the lived body is the foundation of reality (Westphal, 2004). This is to understand in the way that, for instance, cultural practices present themselves or rather materialise in certain body positions. Westphal's aim is to demonstrate that the bodily practice allows a different access or a different form of understanding than the usual cognitive approach. Apart from the traditional focus on the other, the current discourse addresses the third party or person as well. Malte Brinkmann develops the theory of attention or awareness (Brinkmann, 2016). According to this theory, attention can be understood as consisting of two different dimensions. The first dimension concerns the act of calling attention to something. This is followed by the second dimension that addresses the being aware of what was just pointed out. Within this theory attention or as

Brinkmann calls it, 'pedagogical interattentionality', is shown as intercorporeal happening wherein someone shows someone something in front of others. A third party comes into view as a potential observer.

Currently, Brinkmann is engaged in videographic research (Brinkmann/Rödel, 2018). Thereby, the theory of attention is opened up to empirical research. So far, intersubjectively validated results confirm that interattentionality is an ambivalent practice of both calling for attention and being attentive. The utilisation of theoretical considerations in the context of phenomenological pedagogy gains in importance. Several international approaches prove the fruitfulness of a connection of the given theory and empirical efforts. Especially Dutch research was made accessible by Max van Manen. As translator of the works of Martinus J. Langeveld and F. J. J. Buytendijk he opened up Dutch research for an international approach and utilisation for empirical research and educational practice (van Manen, 2014). By means of a 'descriptive phenomenological method' (Giorgi, 2007), that is strictly bound to Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction, Eugene Mario DeRobertis (2017) establishes a phenomenology of learning. Anja Kraus (2015) recommends the phenomenological method for qualitative research when it comes to theoretical and methodological questions about experiences in childhood. Within the German-speaking research field of phenomenological pedagogy one empirical approach must be named the so called 'vignette research' (Schratz et al., 2012). In a participative observation the researcher writes down a short note (vignette) of his or her observations at a selected moment in class. The central aim of this approach is to describe learning experiences *in statu nascendi*. A multiperspective interpretation of the vignette enables a detailed analysis of different phenomena such as learning or intersubjectivity.

Starting with Aloys Fischer's Deskriptive Pädagogik (1914), the discourse on phenomenological pedagogy established itself as an independent field of research. Even though the contributions are based on the philosophical theories of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and others, the current discourse addresses specifically pedagogical matters beyond the given topics. In doing so, the discussion complies easily with the requirements formulated by Fischer. Through the focus on learning as an experience a detailed description of the actual subject matter precedes every theoretical approach. Furthermore, the question of the relation between the subject matter and its surroundings constitutes a main focus of the current discourse. With the abandonment of the anthropocentric idea of the subject as being the starting point for any

further research, the interconnectedness of subject, world and other gains in importance. All in all, phenomenological pedagogy constitutes a growing field of research with an increasing tendency towards empirical research and a general opening for international reception.

Conclusion

Phenomenological pedagogy can look back on a rich and longstanding tradition which is permeated with various interdisciplinary influences. The beginning can be marked by Aloys Fischer's efforts to establish a descriptive pedagogy as basis for further educational research. Within this attempt, he refers to Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction. Both Fischer and Husserl continue to be central points of reference. Throughout the discussion, philosophical concepts are implemented in pedagogical studies (cf. Lippitz, 2003b). In this article, I put my main focus on the two concepts of corporeality and negativity and the relation between them. Regarding corporeality, the lived body as consisting of both mental and physical qualities came into view. Instead of just having a body and an almost independent consciousness, the human subject now exists in its corporeal and intentional relation to the world and the other. This includes an ineluctable possibility of reciprocal influence. Due to this opening of the subject towards foreign influences, negativity becomes one of the main aspects of the constitution of identity. Parts of the subject's self are therefore beyond its own control. Any self-concept has to include negativity as a central component. Käte Meyer-Drawe and Wilfried Lippitz show which implications this entails for educational sciences. Alongside their focus on the concepts of intersubjectivity and foreignness, negativity comes into view as a possibility for a more deeply rooted experience of learning with and through the other. Finally, the current discourse on phenomenological pedagogy is characterised by similar topics. The ongoing emphasis on the sphere of interconnectedness between self, world and other is reflected in the fruitful interdisciplinarity of the theoretical approach.

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