COVID-19 and Educational Discourse: Between a Focus on Well-Being and Attention to Vulnerability

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Abstract: The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for education were not only direct (technological, socio-economic, etc.), but also indirect, prompting a rethinking of attitudes towards many things, including life and human nature. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new attention to the fundamental fragility of human existence and the vulnerability of human nature, which partly balances the imperative of individualized and decontextualized well-being promoted by modern Western culture and education (especially evident in positive education). The theoretical-methodological basis of our research is the comparative analysis of ideas in the philosophy and psychology of education and the philosophy of medicine. The interdisciplinary examination of these constitutes the scientific novelty of the article. We come to understand that modern educational discourse must overcome two extremes, which like any extremes converge: treating the student as an extremely vulnerable being in need of a protected educational environment, and cultivating their self-confidence and extreme self-sufficiency, unwillingness to acknowledge the limits of life's possibilities and one's own abilities.

1 INTRODUCTION

Most researchers (Boer, Andreitso & Timofeeva, 2021; Dube, Williams & Nwabunike, 2021; Gogu, 2020) focus on the technological aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on education. Indeed, the pandemic has exposed the necessity and inevitability of the digital transformation of education.

The social consequences of this process have been less analyzed, including the intensification of student polarization. Traditional (offline) learning has the chance to become a specific privilege, as educational reformers and administrators, tempted by the relative cheapness of the remote format compared to traditional, are not always ready to return education to its former track, despite the pandemic's decline. But there's another side. Nekrasov (2022) notes that in areas such as education or healthcare, the objectively predetermined level of inequality is much higher than in others: One can provide everyone with food beyond what can be eaten, but one cannot be excessively healthy or educated. However, his thesis that the quality of education strongly depends on the professionalism of individual teachers is undermined by the consideration that the 'economy of superstars' emerging under the influence of globalization and digitalization opens access to the creativity of the best professionals, including in education. Digital technologies offer hope for reducing territorial barriers to accessibility, improving the quality of mass education, and increasing the flexibility of educational processes (Malinovskiy & Shibanova, 2022; Smirnova et al. 2022; Voronkova et al., 2023).

Of course, the digitalization of education, powerfully propelled by the pandemic, is not effective in terms of all education as a unity of teaching (cognitive development of the student) and upbringing (as the transmission of values that culture wants to see in its citizens). It deals predominantly with teaching. Thus, it is all the more important to address the problem of COVID-19's impact on the upbringing (value) aspect of education.

The experience of illness, including one as global as COVID-19 – is a path to the practice of philosophizing, a path to rethinking of values

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((self)upbringing). After all, illness, pushing bodily experience to the limit and distancing a person from customary, taken-for-granted ways of existence, forces one to doubt previously learned truths and question fundamental issues of existence – life, death, justice, etc. True philosophy, according to Merleau-Ponty, teaches us to see the world anew. Illness, according to Carel (2013), goes even further: It forces us to relearn how to cope with the world, negotiate with it, and continue living within our capabilities. Of course, this is an excessively radical, even violent and threatening motivation for philosophizing and (self)upbringing.

It cannot be denied that philosophers, including those in education (predominantly in the context of educational inclusion) and medicine (primarily within such humanistic approaches as the phenomenology of medicine and narrative medicine), have only recently begun to focus on the narrowed horizon of possibilities (including as a result of illness, disability, aging).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to realize (both its flaw and merit) the fundamental fragility of human well-being and the vulnerability of human nature. It has taken this issue beyond medicine and inclusive education.

2 THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BASIS

The theme of our theoretical research involves addressing the ideas of representatives of the philosophy of education, the philosophy of medicine (within the framework of the humanistic model of medicine), positive psychology and positive education, as well as humanistic psychology. Their comparative and juxtapositional analyses constitute the theoretical-methodological basis. The research is conducted at the intersection of the philosophy and psychology of education with the philosophy of medicine, which is justified by the interdisciplinary nature of the research and constitutes its scientific novelty.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The school (including higher education) as a microcosm of the broader political (neoliberal or conservative) culture becomes an environment that encourages the development of a student's strengths or attentiveness to his weaknesses and vulnerabilities, orienting him either towards achievement or towards humility.

Although it may seem that two (not necessarily interconnected) tendencies have always coexisted in educational practice – both to reduce weaknesses (especially evident in inclusion) and to enhance strengths, it is positive education, rooted in positive psychology, that has justified the importance of shifting focus from deficit to asset, from destructive to positive, and proclaimed the pursuit of happiness, self-actualization, and flourish as the main goal of pedagogical activity.

Indeed, even A. Maslow, as a prominent representative of humanistic psychology, lamented the psychology's preoccupation with dysfunctions and disorders (such a bias is not accidental – the negative more urgently calls for attention, demands immediate focus, than the positive). As M. E. P. Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology and positive education, later admitted, “Abraham Maslow was the first person to use the term Positive Psychology, his thinking was iconoclastic, and it antedated some of our main ideas.” (Seligman, 2019, p. 18). But he acknowledged that “Abraham Maslow did come too early” (Ibid., p. 19).

The discourse of well-being and flourish, offered by positive psychology and education, is attractive and promising both for the younger generation and for the general public, as it proclaims that happiness is accessible to everyone, as according to the so-called ‘pie model’ (Lyubomirski, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005), external conditions explain only about 10% of the dispersion in individual happiness, which is small compared to the contribution of the individual himself – 40%.

Subjective well-being turns out to be quite independent of objective life conditions. This feature contradicts so much the common myths about the randomness, unpredictability of happiness, and its complete dependence on external favorable circumstances that it was named the paradox of subjective well-being (Leontiev, 2020).

The broader socio-political context of happiness/unhappiness is often ignored. J. Ciarrochi et al. criticize positive psychology and education for their tendency to “de-emphasize context to such an extent as to make context invisible” (Ciarrochi et al., 2016, p. 3).

Ehrenreich (2009) in her book *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* considers the consequences of this ignoration. Responding to her criticism, Seligman (2011) draws a distinction between two realities: ‘reflexive,’ sociopolitical reality derived

from and dependent on social consciousness, and physical reality, which is independent of desires and expectations of people. “Talking about reflexive reality, he denies the ‘reality principle,’ which, in his opinion, is applicable only to the other reality” (Gilyazova & Zamoshchanskii, 2021, p. 358).

Although human progress is moving towards greater control over objective factors, M. E. P. Seligman cunningly neglects the fact of a huge gap (especially in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes) in people's abilities to influence reflexive reality. In the hands of a few, the right (and the possibility of its implementation) to make decisions about what to do and how to live for others and even for humanity as a whole is concentrated. And the rest are forced to comply with the results of the implementation of the competent or incompetent decisions of these few people. “People’s capabilities are also unequal in respect of the physical reality, though it is more ‘resilient’ and uncontrollable. This can be clearly seen when we encounter its adverse events – diseases and pandemics (for example, COVID-19), natural calamities and disasters” (Ibid.).

Such an individualized and decontextualized understanding of well-being promoted by positive psychology and education becomes a tool to maintain the status quo “that does not intrinsically aid the cultivation of all members’ happiness equally” (Jackson & Bingham, 2018, p. 215). As L. Jackson and C. Bingham rightly point out, educators who want to foster social justice in educational settings need to take into account that “happiness cannot be sought in a vacuum apart from other, more mixed emotions, as part of character education.” (Ibid.).

Positive education “aims to introduce a more holistic and positive approach to education” (Cabanas & González-Lamas, 2022, p. 1264). This is both the merit and the drawback of positive education. Not surprisingly, scientists have had a very ambiguous attitude towards the introduction of ‘happiness lessons’ in schools: Miller (2008) believed that positive education is suitable only for a certain type of personality – a cheerful extrovert-careerist. Suissa (2008) thinks that the pursuit of happiness through pedagogical interventions is superficial and anti-educational.

Following Suissa (2008), Smith (2008) and Cigman (2014), A. Guilherme and A. L. S. de Freitas are critical of “this ‘science of happiness’ based on ‘positive psychology,’ because they view such an understanding of ‘happiness’ as being philosophically too reductionist, and not taking account of the richness of life” (Guilherme & de Freitas, 2017, p. 7).

Excessive emphasis on positivity is fraught with obscuring (through rose-colored glasses) the unpleasant aspects of life. A person may fall into quietism and either not notice real troubles and problems, as if they were invisible, or justify them as something self-evident, not subject to alleviation or eradication.

Hence – insensitivity of a person to the sufferings of others, victimization of the insufficiently successful and happy. “The educational discourse should not be built on obscuring or ignoring the fact of existence fragility and unequal opportunities people have for stabilizing that fragility” (Gilyazova & Zamoshchanskii, 2021).

After all, without the awareness of fragility, there is no empathy, tolerance, acceptance of inclusion, difference, imperfection (Dyachkova et al., 2019; Shutaleva et al., 2023).

According to M. C. Nussbaum, “part of the peculiar beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 2). Applying her words to education, L. Wolbert writes “A proper educational discourse requires a deep understanding of the fragility of things that are constitutive of or contribute to good education” (Wolbert, 2018, p. 322).

Moreover, the lack of recognition of the fundamental fragility of human well-being and life, and the connotation of ‘losing,’ often demoralizes. The problem is that the modern approach to well-being, and to life in general, glorifies fighters and condemns losers. ‘Fighting’ is presented as the only correct and worthy process to be supported and praised (Macfarlane & Carson, 2023). And the one who did not want or could not achieve victory, despite all their efforts, is essentially equated to a loser. This connotation is extremely unfair and demeaning towards the ‘losers’ and stigmatizes them even in cases where victory was fundamentally unattainable. It implies that millions who are dying are to blame themselves, for not being fighters. If they had just wanted to fight – they too would have survived. Fight, and everything will be fine! This kind of rhetoric could also be heard in relation to the coronavirus.

However, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first in its danger and influence in this century and millennium, has questioned the illusion of personal invulnerability, integrity, and indestructibility. Diseases, more than anything else, demonstrate that human abilities, freedom, and self-sufficiency are fragile, unguaranteed, and extremely vulnerable gifts of life.

According to MacIntyre (1999), the involuntary forgetting that life is not limited to its adult period but includes childhood and infancy, and (less often) old

age, inadvertently contributes to the exacerbation of the illusion of autonomy and independence. Diseases, especially disabling ones, plunging into a state of helplessness and dependence on others, reveal the insufficiency of such an adultly overconfident representation. “We are more limited than we like to think, Gadamer claims” (Kerdeman, 2015, p. 735).

The modern Western world with its piety towards eternal youth, success, social demand, and optimism (even if strained) requires a person to always be autonomous, independent, and 'firmly stand on their feet' (in both literal and metaphorical senses), which turns human dependence on others into weakness, and caring for them into a burdensome onerous obligation, and themselves into a burden (Toombs, 2019, p. 221).

The imperative of ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ contributes to the devaluation of a person. Therefore, according to S. K. Toombs, it is important that a person's (self)evaluation is not only from the position of ‘doing’ (the ability to be useful, to produce something), but also of their ‘being’ (character) (Ibid., p. 222). It is not for nothing that authentic education includes not only teaching (‘doing’), but also upbringing (‘being’).

The main thing is not to fall into the temptation of fetishizing one's vulnerabilities (which is sometimes characteristic of religious consciousness), but to consider them as “a ground of solidarity with all human beings as we are all vulnerable and all in need of courage, resilience, integrity, and patience” (Quilter, 2016, p. 25).

Overall, the experience of the pandemic has shown that modern educational discourse must avoid its own Scylla and Charybdis: 1) Perceiving students as extremely vulnerable beings and reducing education to forming a culture of well-being, facilitating the creation of a safe, favorable, and caring environment; 2) The idea of strong individual freedom, supposedly independent of external (including global) circumstances, the flip side of which is the emergence of a sense of frustration for the inability to be successful in any situation.

The result of the convergence of these extremes is obvious: The excess of choice, the immense pressure on children, or rather on their vain parents, when they are urged to strive for success from as early an age as possible, leads to a paradox: In developed countries, the lives of most children and teenagers are materially prosperous and socially protected like never before. In today's child-centric era, children's interests come to the forefront. And at the same time, according to some researchers (Palmer, 2006; Vanobbergen, 2018), children today are becoming less happy.

To overcome these extremes, Gert Biesta's philosophy of education is fruitful. The concept of education as subjectification he proposes is aimed at opening up for youth adult ways of living life, awakening the desire to be the subject of their own life. (Naturally, ‘adulthood’ here does not have an age meaning, it is not a stage of development or a result of a development trajectory). To be an adult, i.e., to be a subject, means being able “to exist in the world without considering oneself as the centre, origin or ground of the world – which is exactly how Philippe Meirieu describes the ‘student subject’” (Biesta, 2019, p. 54). You need to understand the fact and be able to reckon with the fact that “our subjectness is not in our hands but to a large degree dependent on what others do with our initiatives” (Ibid., p. 55).

It means that education should provide experience not only in discoveries and accomplishments, but also in failures and disappointments. In this respect, the present-day attempt to make education highly enjoyable, flexible, personalized and adapted to dispositions of each student prevents education from performing its socialization function in the world that is not as pleasant and friendly.

Negative experience is an inextricable part of a meaningful life, and attempts to entirely shield a child from this experience impoverish him, hinder the development of psychological immunity, resilience, and stability to future trials.

If we struggle too much with the pressure of the world, there is a risk of breaking this world. But excessive compliance with the world can end up with us breaking under its pressure. “This suggests that the existential challenge – which is lifelong – is that of trying to stay in the difficult ‘middle ground’ in between world-destruction and self-destruction. This is the place – physically and metaphorically – where we try to be ‘at home in the world,’ try to ‘reconcile ourselves to reality.’” (Biesta, 2020, p. 97).

Adult maturity, according to G. Biesta, is characterized not only and not so much by readiness for successes, accomplishments, achievements, but also for failures, falls.

It is important to learn not only to be successful but also vulnerable, mature not only in readiness to take risks but also in recognizing the limits of one's possibilities.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The merit of the pandemic lies not only in highlighting and mainstreaming the digital transformation of education and its intensification but

also in realizing the need to advance the educational discourse with a more balanced and realistic view of life and human nature – without the extremes inherent in the conservative-religious approach with its excessive humility and self-deprecation, and the neoliberal approach (whose ethos is most vividly expressed in positive psychology and education) with its excessive self-assurance.

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