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THE CHALLENGE OF LEARNING TO STEP 'OUTSIDE MYSELF': MERLEAU-PONTY'S LECTURES ON CHILD PSYCHOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY AND THE ONTOLOGY OF EXISTENCE

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Established theoretical approaches aimed at understanding childhood and children have been challenged in recent years by posthumanist thinkers (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013) who reject dichotomies such as mind/body; reason/emotions; human/non-human and postqualitative researchers who seek to decolonise the discourses of childhood (Murris, 2016). And yet, mainstream educational approaches continue to foreground developmental psychology and its child/adult dichotomy, grounded in the Cartesian ontology of separation (Bates, 2021). Cartesian ontology posits that *mind* and *world* are separate 'substances' with essentially different 'properties', which exist independently of each other. Individuals are viewed within Descartes' ontology as equally 'atomised': separate from one another and from the world. Whilst Cartesian ontology of separation severs 'inside' from 'outside' to center the self-grounding mind located 'inside' the atomised self, Merleau-Ponty's (2002) ontology of existence reminds me that I live from the start 'outside myself', entangled in the world and others through relationships of mutual dependence. This paper draws on Merleau-Ponty's *Lectures on Child Psychology and Pedagogy* (CPP) to challenge 'atomistic' theoretical and educational approaches to childhood.

The Lectures were written between 1949 and 1952, when Merleau-Ponty held the role of chair of psychology and pedagogy at the Sorbonne, just before Jean Piaget. Translated fully into English in 2010 by Talia Welsh, the *Lectures* have much to offer to educators (CPP, 2010). The lectures challenge the reader to consider important epistemological and methodological questions. How can we apprehend the meaning of childhood, given the contradictory epistemologies of child development? What methods enable us to reconnect to the world of the child when, as adults, we are children-no-more? What educational implications arise from Merleau-Ponty's ontology of existence?

As explained in my recent book (Bates, 2021), to understand 'the totality of the child's becoming' (CPP: 388), Merleau-Ponty drew on three key sources: firstly, the work of Sigmund Freud, one of the first thinkers to 'take the child seriously' (CPP: 280). Merleau-Ponty adopted a broad interpretation of Freud's psychoanalytic theory to understand childhood traumas as re-lived by adults in their attitudes and behavioral patterns, rather than as repressed and buried in the unconscious (CCP: 73). Secondly, he identified important synergies between psychoanalytic theory and his thesis of

embodiment to highlight the importance of biological functions in the formation of the child's personality, with an understanding of this formation supported by a focus on the embodied existence of the child (CPP: 280). Thirdly, in his investigation of perception as a deep source of knowing which operates beneath the level of consciousness, he drew on Gestalt psychology (CPP: 200). Gestalt psychology explains that our perception does not separate what we perceive into discrete, atomised 'properties': we perceive patterns within the whole. For example, when apprehending a figure against a background, my perception of the figure is informed by the figure as well as its background (ground): I perceive the 'totality' of figure-ground.

These three sources led Merleau-Ponty to a critique of 'classical' psychology, methods that 'only apply statistics' and 'Aristotelian-type' classifications (CPP: 387). His critique was levelled at thinking which continues to underpin mainstream educational approaches to this day: the cognitivist and behaviorist views of child development, advanced at the time by Piaget and Watson respectively. According to Merleau-Ponty, Piaget's research introduced 'foreign problematics' to the study of children, based on asking them inappropriate questions which children would not ask themselves (CPP: 383). For example, in his research on the development of the concept of 'thought', Piaget (1929: 37) would ask children: 'What is it you think with?'. A 'wrong' answer was interpreted as evidence of lack of 'coherence' and 'systematisation' (1929: 25) which characterise the sophisticated cognitive capabilities of adults. Interpreting children's thinking through the analytical categories of adults meant that Piaget misunderstood children; he failed to understand children in their own terms.

Merleau-Ponty was also critical of stimulus-response as the basis of simplistic causal explanations of behavior in Watson's behaviourism. Watson dismissed *consciousness* as belonging to philosophical 'speculations' that should 'trouble the student of behavior as little as they trouble the student of physics' (1914: 8-9). Merleau-Ponty identified three problems with Watson's dismissal of consciousness, intentionality and perception. Firstly, Watson's simplistic view of causality, concerned solely with external relations, was flawed because of intentionality. Intentionality entails that individuals are *motivated* not *caused* to act (CPP: 351). Secondly, since the intentions motivating actions were of no interest to behaviorists, they were unable to differentiate between the internal meanings of different behavioural patterns. Thirdly, Watson's flawed idea of scientific objectivity obscured the fact that the world is always apprehended from within a human situation (CPP: 345), with implications to psychologists studying human behaviour, as well as adults who work and live with children.

Merleau-Ponty was also critical of methods that 'only employ statistics', drawing on Kurt Lewin's (1931) analysis of 'classical' psychology as a science of the 'Aristotelian type'. Lewin challenged dichotomies and abstractly defined categories pertaining to an 'essential nature' of people underpinning Aristotelian thinking. By eliminating chance to establish the regularity of events occurring 'often', 'in the same way', the Aristotelian idea of lawfulness acquires a quasi-statistical character but loses the particularity of each child and the totality (Gestalt) of her situation. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty did not reject a focus on child development, instead he sought to point

out the flaws in 'classical' developmental psychology and refocus on *this* particular child, understood in her own terms (Welsh, 2013) in *this* specific situation.

One key educational implication of the *Lectures* is to serve as a reminder that our understanding of children may be clouded by attempts to make sense of children's experience through our own analytical categories. Much contemporary educational practice continues to use Piagetian and behaviourist lenses on child development, leading to a reductive, negative view of children's capabilities. This can be illustrated by the idea of 'readiness', for example reading readiness, based on an assumption that children are 'ready' to start learning to decode text when they reach a particular developmental stage. For a child, reading is a social situation which goes beyond readiness to decode text. To transcend methods that 'only employ statistics', Aristotelian-type classifications and Piaget's 'interrogative' methods (CPP: 141), studies of children should focus on their lived experience rather than the thoughts or ideas we have about this experience, within a Gestalt of figure-ground: the child in the totality of her being (figure) and the totality of her situated experience (ground). For example, to understand inappropriate behaviour, we need to see it as part of the figure, with the ground consisting a range of factors, from the child's family circumstances, friendship groups, curriculum that does or does not engage her, the history of our own relationship with the child, the specific situation in which inappropriate behaviour has occurred and many other factors.

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that 'classical' science invites us to a Cartesian universe of separation, in which the complexities of our living with others are reduced to mechanistic, stimulus-response interactions among atomised individuals. When we invite children to this Cartesian universe, we educate them out of the universe of existence, where we live from the start 'outside' ourselves, entangled with the 2: 530) is at the core of becoming a mature person. world and others. The challenge of learning to step 'outside myself' (MP, 200

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SMALL SCHOOLS AND RETHINKING INCLUSION

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The predictions are that two thirds of the world population will live in cities by the middle of this century. The distribution of people across urban and rural spaces differs across the regions of the globe, but the trend is for living to become ever more metrocentric, with urban life as normalcy. Working against the grain, communities in peripheral places, those far from urban centres, educate and bring up the next generation through schooling that is very often provided in ways that reflect place-based realities. Topology and topography shape education in positive and negative ways in peripheral places. This abstract discusses small schools with multi/mixed grade provision in peripheral contexts and focuses on the opportunities for rethinking inclusion that these specific conditions allow.

Peripherality is associated with a range of locations. Geographical areas that are hard to access owing to the terrain can be termed peripheral. Similarly, the regions that are mountainous, comprise an archipelago or are coastal maybe seen as peripheral (Hirshberg et al., 2023). In contrast, in Australia for example, peripherality applies to the inaccessible centre of the landmass. In terms of education, peripherality relates to contexts that are outside of the usual conditions familiar to state or national ministries and departments of education (Gristy et al., 2020). Schools that meet nationally/federally determined classifications of peripherality, are referred to more generally as isolated or remote, thereby emphasising the ways in which they fall outside expected metrocentric norms.

A school in such remote or isolated circumstances is demarked by some typical features and practices but each has its own history and neighbourhood, so attempts to homogenise should be avoided. The school often is an asset in the local setting, being looked on with fondness and seen as forming the heart of the village. It provides a focus for local activities and building a sense of community as families relate to the space as somewhere where memories have been made by generations of residents. There are rich opportunities for drawing on the natural environment and local cultural heritages to enhance teaching (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008). Moreover, in such circumstances, the small number of children on roll encourages close relationships to form with the teachers getting to know families and their children as individuals, while the pupils get to play with all their peers in the school.

The school as the heart of the village is not without challenges. Notably, the settlements in which these schools operate have small populations, which might be decreasing through outmigration to cities or, alternatively, experiencing a rapidly