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Philosophy, Praxis, and Reasonable Hope: A Conversation with John P. Portelli

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Abstract

This conversation with John P. Portelli explores the ethical, political, and existential dimensions of education through the intertwined themes of hidden curriculum, democratic life, teacher formation, literature, praxis, and reasonable hope. Drawing on Portelli's long-standing contributions to philosophy of education, curriculum studies, social justice, and critical democratic pedagogy, the interview examines how education can resist reductive tendencies such as standardization, deficit thinking, technicism, and the ideology of "best practices." Portelli reflects on his own educational formation, the moral significance of exposing hidden curricula, the possibility of ethically justified subversion, and the need to understand pedagogical judgment as relational rather than relative. The conversation also foregrounds the role of literature, art, humor, and existential reflection in teacher education, challenging the reduction of teaching to technical competence. By emphasizing that "the practical is not the same as the ethical" and that educators "cannot give up reasonable hope," Portelli presents philosophy of education as a lived, dialogical, and transformative practice. The interview contributes to contemporary discussions on philosophy of education by reaffirming the inseparability of thought and action, theory and practice, and critique and hope.

Keywords

John P. Portelli,
Philosophy of education,
Hidden curriculum,
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Introduction

John P. Portelli's work occupies a distinctive place in philosophy of education, curriculum studies, teacher education, and critical democratic educational thought. Across his writings, Portelli has consistently challenged reductive understandings of education: the reduction of teaching to technique, of learning to examination performance, of democracy to procedural sameness, and of philosophy to detached theoretical reflection. His work on the hidden curriculum, standardized teacher testing, deficit thinking, inclusive education, neoliberalism, and social justice demonstrates a sustained commitment to understanding education as an ethical, political, and existential practice—one that is always entangled with questions of power, recognition, justice, and human possibility (Portelli, 1993; Portelli et al., 2005; Portelli & Konecny, 2013; Portelli & Koneeny, 2018; Sharma & Portelli, 2014).

This conversation was conducted for the *Journal of Applied Philosophy of Education* as part of the journal's broader effort to rethink philosophy of education as a dialogical, ethically responsible, and transformative engagement with educational life. The interview begins with Portelli's personal and intellectual formation, including his early experience of being judged through an exam-based and deficit-oriented schooling mentality. From there, the conversation moves toward several central themes in his work: the hidden curriculum, the ethics of subversion, the politics of praxis, the critique of "best practices," teacher formation, literature, and educational hope. These themes can be read alongside Portelli's long-standing concern with the moral implications of hidden educational processes, the limits of standardization, and the need to foreground equity, inclusion, and democratic life in educational practice (Portelli, 1993; Portelli et al., 2005; Portelli & Koneeny, 2018; Sharma & Portelli, 2014).

Several formulations in this interview capture the force of Portelli's position with particular clarity. When he states that "the practical is not the same as the ethical," he challenges one of the most persistent assumptions in contemporary education: that what is feasible, efficient, or institutionally convenient is necessarily educationally defensible. This concern is consistent with his critique of standardized teacher testing and with his broader argument that educational accountability, when narrowly conceived, can fail both excellence and validity by neglecting the ethical, ecological, and consequential dimensions of educational judgment (Portelli et al., 2005). For Portelli, the easy path is not always the responsible one. Educational practice requires courage because ethical action often demands more than compliance with what is immediately possible or institutionally rewarded.

This concern also shapes his discussion of the ethics of subversion. Portelli does not romanticize concealment or manipulation; rather, he asks what educators should do when dominant systems suppress equity, social justice, or student well-being. His claim that "we cannot be paralyzed" is therefore not a call for reckless action, but a reminder that educators must act in good faith, with critical awareness of context, intention, and consequence. This stance resonates with his work on neoliberalism, democracy, and subversion, where he and Konecny argue that democratic educational commitments may require ethically justified forms of resistance in the face of systems organized by neoliberal logics (Portelli & Konecny, 2013). It also connects with later work on the influence of neoliberal performance discourses on social justice educators' ways of speaking about their own practice (MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020). In unjust conditions, responsible educational work may require quiet, careful, and ethically justified forms of resistance.

A further thread running through the conversation is Portelli's distinction between the relational and the relative. His statement that "pedagogy and judgment are relational, not relative" offers an important alternative to both technicism and relativism. Against the ideology of "best practices," he argues that no pedagogical act can be judged apart from context, purpose, and relationship. Yet this does not mean that anything goes. Educational judgment must remain ethically accountable, particularly in relation to racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of injustice. This distinction can be read alongside his later work on dialogical truth, where truth is approached neither as intrinsic objectivity nor as intrinsic relativism, but as a relational and dialogical epistemology attentive to power, democracy, and the political construction of facts (Portelli & Oladi, 2021).

The interview also opens a rich discussion of teacher formation. Portelli's emphasis on the poetic, the artistic, the existential, and even the humorous challenges the reduction of teacher education to technical preparation. His observation that "mainstream teaching kills the spirit of the literary and artistic" is not simply a critique of dull pedagogy; it is a critique of educational cultures that drain literature and art of their living force by turning them into canonical, examinable, and culturally imposed objects. For Portelli, literature and art matter when they connect with students' lived experiences and open pathways into the human condition. This concern resonates with his literary and cultural engagement with migration, identity, survival, and resistance, including his work with Oladi on Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous*

Pursuits, where subjectivity and identity are explored through movement, uncertainty, and the disruption of fixed forms of being (Lalami, 2015; Oladi & Portelli, 2017).

This leads to another powerful claim: "Literature itself can be activism." Portelli distinguishes the academic from the intellectual and suggests that literature can sometimes reach aspects of human life that rigid academic discourse cannot. Literature, in this sense, does not merely illustrate educational theory; it can disclose suffering, migration, exile, recognition, violence, dignity, and hope in ways that philosophical or empirical discourse may struggle to express. Here, an existential sensibility becomes visible: education is not only a matter of knowledge, method, or policy, but also a confrontation with the human condition—with vulnerability, finitude, belonging, displacement, and the search for meaning. Literature becomes a mode of intellectual and ethical engagement precisely because it can make these dimensions felt, narrated, and imaginatively reinhabited. In this respect, Portelli's work invites us to consider not only how education can be theorized, but also how it can be lived, narrated, felt, and transformed.

The conversation concludes with the idea of "reasonable hope." Portelli does not offer hope as optimism detached from reality. Rather, he frames it as a difficult but necessary ethical stance in fragile times. For educators, students, and communities living under conditions of inequity, under-resourcing, or authoritarianism, hope must be joined with courage, solidarity, and mutual support. His closing insistence that "we cannot give up reasonable hope" speaks directly to the kind of philosophy of education this journal seeks to foster: one that does not merely interpret educational life, but participates in its ethical, pedagogical, and institutional renewal.

Personal Beginnings: Deficit Mentality, Recognition, and the Meaning of Education

Looking back, what personal, intellectual, or educational experiences most shaped your sense of what education ought to be?

When I was 15 years and 3 months, I failed almost all the exams in high school, and I did not complete school. I was labeled as "being good only to be thrown in the fire." This experience showed me the terrible dangers of the deficit mentality and the reliance on a one-size-fits-all exam mentality, where education is solely identified with memorizing and marks. For me, education should be focused on understanding and a genuine critical ability. But two people in the village I grew up in believed in me. With their support, 3 years later, I started university, where I studied philosophy and literature. At the university, Professor Rev. Peter Serracino Inglott, Chair of Philosophy and Dean and later Rector, was a formidable example for me, and

his way of being influenced my thinking, although I did not always concur with his philosophical stance.

Your work moves across philosophy of education, democratic life, equity, and literature. How do you see these strands coming together in your own intellectual journey?

Although all my graduate studies were in philosophy, I eventually applied philosophy to education. Influenced by the work of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, education and democracy go hand in hand. They require each other to survive and flourish. Until I defended my doctoral thesis at McGill, I was immersed in the analytical tradition, but shortly after, I realized that genuine philosophy requires a strong dosage of social justice and equity. At that time, I came to the realization that the liberal Anglo-Saxon tradition in which I was trained reproduces colonial mentalities, deficit mentality, and the myth of neutrality and equality of opportunity. Slowly, I came to believe that education is intrinsically political and that it is not truly educational if not coupled with equity (not identical to equality of opportunity) and robust social justice. Later, I also managed to combine my interest in literature and the creative aspect of my work with education and social justice. Now I believe that literature provides a more honest and possibly a stronger form of activism than the rigid academic work if we truly want to change the world for the better.

Was there a particular moment, question, or tension that led you to see philosophy of education not as an abstract field, but as something that must remain closely connected to lived educational realities?

Not really. Since I started studying philosophy at the age of 17, I envisaged philosophy as a necessary component in daily, ordinary life. I never saw philosophy as an exclusive, esoteric discipline. I never believed in the conception of a philosopher lost in his or her thoughts and cut off from life. For me, the two go together, feeding on each other. Thinking and doing are inseparable. For me, this is an existential, ontological dialectic.

As someone who has written in both philosophical and literary modes, do you see a connection between your philosophical voice and your literary voice? If so, where do they meet?

I started writing poetry before I started formally studying philosophy. Throughout my academic career, since 1982, I continued to write literary work, although my major publication focus was on philosophy and education, given my formal employment. However, ten years before I retired, I realized that literary work has greater potential and is more satisfying than narrow

academic work. I distinguish between the academic and the intellectual; the two are not synonymous. There are a lot of intellectual components in literary work. And since then, I have focused more on literary works. Luckily, I was able to develop a course entitled "Narrative of Migration and Exile: Implications for Education" in which we read only literary works. I still teach this course online once a year. Although I believe that the aim of good literature is not to pass along "a message" or "a didactic lesson", in my literary work, one can observe strong existential elements combined with critical philosophical perspectives not only in the content but also in the format and style.

Exposing the Hidden Curriculum: Ethics, Trust, and Schooling

In your earlier response, you spoke movingly about being labeled through an exam-based mentality and about the importance of being genuinely believed in. Do you see such experiences as part of the hidden curriculum of schooling — that is, the implicit messages schools communicate about worth, intelligence, and human possibility?

There is no doubt that schools are sending the message that if you do not pass exams, you are not intelligent and do not work hard enough. This definitely is not an educational aim. I am not sure it is part of the hidden curriculum, as it is so obvious. I have encountered this mentality anywhere I worked or lived. If by "hidden curriculum" you mean a by-product of schooling, then it definitely is. Schooling, for the most part, is still a mechanism that determines who succeeds and fails. The message is that if you do not succeed in schooling, you are like a second-class citizen.

In "Exposing the Hidden Curriculum" (Portelli, 1993), you argue that the hidden curriculum always has a normative or moral component. Would you still defend that claim today in the same way? If so, what do you think is most often missed when educators treat the hidden curriculum as a merely sociological or institutional phenomenon?

In my paper, I distinguished different forms of hiddenness that can occur in any context. I identified different logically possible forms of hiddenness. I also provided examples of each. At the same time, I admit that a hidden curriculum occurs within a certain context, which is both sociological and institutional, and also political and value-laden. But it is not just that. There are forms of hiddenness that are created and reproduced both by educators and students beyond the institutional production of hiddenness. There definitely is a normative or moral component to any hidden curriculum. Overall, I believe we would be better off exposing it and dealing with it. However, since then, I also developed the concept and argued for the ethics of

subversion, which, at face value, may be seen to contradict my original argument about exposing the hidden curriculum.

You also suggest that educators have a responsibility to make the hidden curriculum as explicit as possible. Why is this, in your view, not only a pedagogical matter but also an ethical one?

First of all, I believe that as educators we must be aware of the inevitable reality of a hidden curriculum (*a* hidden curriculum rather than *the* hidden curriculum since while the hidden curriculum is a generic concept, it encapsulates different forms of hiddenness). We must be on the lookout for it, as it can work counter to our original aims even if our intentions are good. Once we are aware of it, in most cases, we have to make it explicit unless our aim is to indoctrinate. This responsibility is not inconsistent with the ethics of subversion. There are times when, in the interest of the well-being of the students, and on occasions, our own well-being, we have to subvert the system. A genuine educational process needs to be not only pedagogically sound but also ethically or morally tenable. Pedagogy does not exist in a vacuum; pedagogical moves are acceptable or not depending on the individual and social context. The latter is a crucial point to understand the dangers of "the best practices" ideology. There are good practices that need to be utilized consciously depending on the context.

Your article distinguishes different forms of hidden curriculum rather than treating it as a single phenomenon. Looking at schools today, which form do you think has become especially powerful or urgent?

I have not carried out an empirical study on this matter. But in my view, in the times we are living, the two most important aspects of hiddenness are the hidden curriculum of the very system itself, which is full of contradictions (not the same as paradoxes!). The system claims to be democratic, but in many instances, it is not because of the presence of colonial and imperialistic cultures. The second one is the hidden curriculum of the students. If we truly want to engage students, we have an obligation to understand how they are thinking and feeling as much as possible.

In contemporary educational settings shaped by digital platforms, data systems, surveillance, and algorithmic forms of classification, do you think we are witnessing new forms of hidden curriculum? If so, what concerns you most about them?

In my articles, I identified different logically possible kinds of hiddenness. If my analysis is correct, then this cannot change. But the items you mentioned will influence the content of any kind of hidden curriculum.

Politics of Praxis: Theory, Practice, Subversion, and Judgment

Your work places strong emphasis on making the hidden curriculum explicit, yet you have also argued for an ethics of subversion. How should we understand the relationship between these two commitments: the ethical responsibility to expose hidden curricula and the need, in some contexts, for quiet or subversive forms of educational action?

In my earlier paper on the hidden curriculum, I argued that all different forms of the hidden curriculum need, on moral grounds, to be made explicit (Portelli, 1993). I still hold to this view. At the same time, I have argued for the ethics of subversion. Subversion is, at face value, seen to be always negative or immoral. I have argued that it all depends on what is being subverted and in what context. For example, in Nazi Germany, if you were hiding Jewish people in your house and the police came to your house and asked you if you were hiding Jewish people, the morally correct thing to do is to tell them that you are not, because you too are a Nazi. Such a move is ethically justified on the basis that to save a human life is of greater value than to lie. Likewise, in neoliberal and ultra-conservative times we are living in, educators find themselves in the predicament of not always announcing what they are doing, otherwise their work in favor of equity and social justice may be totally squashed, and also they may lose jobs or their lives are made miserable, and they end up with serious mental problems or burnout. I have seen this happening. This may sound like an argument to hide the hidden curriculum. But it is not. The teachers are aware of what they are doing, and they explain what they are doing to their students. And yet, they quietly and subversively do their work without blowing any trumpets, etc.

You have been consistently critical of the ideology of "best practices." Could you say more about why this language is so problematic, and what it obscures about pedagogy, judgment, and context?

The ideology of "best practices" rests on the belief that there are practices that are good or bad always because of their qualities, irrespective of the context and/or what one is aiming for. This is a technicist philosophy that holds that certain techniques are intrinsically good and universally so, irrespective of the differences in contexts. Pedagogy and judgment (not the same as being judgmental) are always relational (which is different from relative) to the context. Certain educational contexts and aims may require certain practices, and given other contexts,

the practices may need to vary. In other words, the ideology of best practices ultimately rests on a one-size-fits-all mentality and neutrality. The problem with the language of best practices is exactly with what is implied from it and what it assumes. It can also be argued that this mentality reduces teachers to technicists rather than educators.

You noted that educational systems often claim to be democratic while still carrying colonial and imperial cultures within them. What do you see as some of the clearest examples of this contradiction in contemporary education?

The clearest examples are found in neoliberal thinking and the one-size mentality, as well as the deficit mentality. In general, neoliberal practices in education have taken the form of standardization, which rests on the colonial mentality of one-size-fits-all and the deficit mentality. While democratic values should aspire for openness of possibilities, the recognition and support of differences (in abilities, aims, understandings of excellence, etc.), the mainstream common mentality rests on equality, that is, applying the same things irrespective of differences. This amounts to the propagation of sameness rather than equity, which supports differences. Those who have power control what should be the norm (one-size), and if you do not fit in the norm, then you are labeled as a failure. Such a mentality ultimately is identical to the colonial mentality that did not accept the normative and political and spiritual differences that the colonized practices and believed in. The colonizer was/is always deemed to be superior and "the best", and hence they should be imitated blindly.

In your work on teacher education, you argue that philosophy should not be treated as a detached or purely theoretical field. What kind of formation, in your view, do teachers most need if they are to become reflective and ethically responsive practitioners rather than technicians?

Contrary to the popular perception, for me, philosophy, while abstract in nature, has always been connected with the experience of daily life as individuals and within social institutions. Ultimately, the fundamental philosophical questions arise from the existential human condition. Education, in its core, is about the human condition; its primary aim is to improve the well-being of students through learning and understanding. Learning and understanding are not the same as memorizing; they intrinsically involve open inquiry, critical analysis, and intelligent practices. So, for me, a proper formation for teachers is to offer them the supportive space to learn and understand more about the human condition with critical abilities that take into account fairness, social justice, and equity. Hence, the philosophical, the existential, the poetic

and artistic, the scientific, and all other aspects of learning matter primarily in relation to the actions needed to improve ourselves individually and as social beings. Thoughts, emotions, and actions are equally important for teacher education. I think teacher education would benefit a lot from this conceptualization that needs to include much more of the poetic and humorous, rather than narrow rigidity.

In one of your earlier responses, you said that thinking and doing are inseparable and described this as an existential and ontological dialectic. How does this conviction continue to shape your understanding of education today?

My answer to the preceding question is based on my belief as expressed in your sentence for this question. The existential and ontological dialectic, which is, by definition, unfinished, as Paulo Freire clearly highlighted and argued for. So for me, this dialectic continues to be central in my thinking and way of being, including education. My serious concern is that with the overemphasis on extreme individualism and ultra-colonial conservatism, these important aspects of human life and education are put aside if not seen as a stumbling block to 'success'! A real tragedy.

Literature, Bildung, and Reasonable Hope

In your work, the problem is not simply the gap between theory and practice, but the hierarchical and political way that this relation is often constructed. How should we rethink the theory–practice relation in education today?

The problem is how to interpret the so-called "gap" between theory and practice. Usually, this "gap" is interpreted as a weakness of theory. I have argued this is a total misconstruction of the nature of theory and its relation to practice; a misconstruction that arises from a colonial, positivist understanding of the world, which is continuously reproduced, unfortunately, both by faculties of education, teachers' unions, and practicing teachers and policy makers. This is an absolutely crucial point.

From a traditionalist, positivist perspective, the role of theory is to dish out solutions to practice. And hence, if what it proposes does not "work", then it is blamed for the gap. Moreover, theory is seen as being more important than practice, since theoreticians are meant to dictate and practitioners are meant to follow. Essentially, theory is constructed as being more important. From a critical perspective, which criticizes the positivist position both on epistemological, ethical, and political grounds, the role of theory is to critically analyze situations and offer a vision and possibilities of actualizing it, knowing that as human beings are unfinished and

therefore, we will never achieve perfection. The role of practitioners is to professionally (in its fullest sense, not just the professionalism of ties and suits!) analyze and critically make judgments on ethical, epistemological, and political perspectives in the name of social justice and equity, and act accordingly. As mentioned, we are not perfect, and even if we make the best decisions, we do not always actualize them, not because our decisions were not the right ones, but because we were perhaps weak or the circumstances changed without us being aware of them. If a gap exists between what we believe and plan, and what we actually do, the fault is not necessarily the fault of our thinking. In response, mainstream people say, "we just have to be practical", meaning we have to do the easy thing even if it goes against our beliefs. The practical is not the same as the ethical. To do the right thing is usually difficult. But as professionals, we should not be looking for easy ways. Our primary aim is the well-being of students. And many times, ethically appropriate decisions and actions require lots of courage.

Of course, this is not to say that we should not revise our thinking based on our experiences. Just as our thinking influences our actions, our actions (or failure of them) may impact our own thinking.

Your discussion of the ethics of subversion is very powerful. How can educators distinguish between ethically justified subversion and forms of concealment or manipulation that would be educationally problematic?

The distinction is not always easy. But as I argued above, our responsibility is to be responsible rather than take the easy road of mediocrity and popularity. Imagine if such an attitude of mediocrity and easy way out were taken in medicine, for example. So why should it be accepted if not required in education? Teachers must accept the crucible of their own profession. The major distinguishing marks need to be our intentions and the critical analysis of the context/s. And to do so properly, we need to be very well informed. At times, of course, we need to consult with each other as professionals commonly do. And then we act in good faith. We cannot be paralyzed.

I found your distinction between the "relational" and the "relative" especially important. Could you say more about how teachers can develop context-sensitive judgment without falling into relativism?

First of all, as human beings, we must be aware that we are constantly in a relational experience as long as we are alive. All professionals have the responsibility to examine the context/s of the

relational existential experiences we continuously face; it is a chain of relationality. We can't escape it; it is part of what makes us human after all. This reality is not identical to the view that everything is relative. Of course, the contexts of our relationalities vary. But from these existential encounters, we can elicit principles that we can universalize to similar situations. Without such principles, any actions would be acceptable, even racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, etc.

Your emphasis on the poetic, the artistic, the existential, and even humor seems to challenge the reduction of teacher education to technical preparation. Could this be understood as a renewed idea of Bildung? And how can literature, art, or the classics become part of a living formation rather than another imposed curriculum?

The reply to the first part of your questionis a resounding yes. But it is important to understand the human not from a colonial perspective!

In my own personal experience as a student, teacher, and professor, unfortunately, I have to admit that mainstream teaching kills the spirit of the literary and artistic. Rarely have I encountered teachers who truly present and live the artistic spirit. In my view, the dominant "canonical ways" are remnants of colonial thinking.

We need to present literature and art in its living mode as it connects to students' own lived experiences, which, of course, are varied. But to do so successfully, we have to eliminate the fear that students have because of the regime of exams and the mentality of giving the teacher what he or she wants. I have written about this in my articles on the curriculum OF life, which is very different from the curriculum for life.

You also distinguish between the academic and the intellectual, and suggest that literature may sometimes be a more honest or powerful form of activism than academic writing. What can literature disclose about education that academic discourse often cannot?

The distinction between the academic and the intellectual was made by the late bell hooks. It is a distinction that truly matters. In my view and experience, literature presented as I have described above has the potential to eliminate the *rigor mortis* of the academy. It truly has the possibility of getting into the core of the human condition/s, which could lead to positive and healthy activism. Literature itself can be activism.

The Journal of Applied Philosophy of Education seeks to position philosophy of education not merely as a theoretical or interpretive field, but as a dialogical, ethical, and transformative engagement with educational life. From your perspective, what role might such a journal play

today? More specifically, how important is it for philosophy of education to return to, and critically reactivate, its classical and modern roots — from ethical formation and phronesis to Dewey and Freire — in order to respond to contemporary educational problems?

I find such a journal truly commendable and encouraging. It is exactly the kind of journal philosophy and education need. Classical and modern roots? I am not convinced of the classic. Modern, some parts, definitely. There are aspects of Dewey and Freire, especially the latter, that, in my view, are crucial for education today. But I am not ready to accept Dewey fully. His philosophical pragmatism, which is different from the popular understanding of being pragmatic, can be dangerous as it can be used to reproduce colonial attitudes. But this is not to say there are no points to take from Dewey for today. Definitely his emphasis on experience. But it is crucial to discuss critically how we interpret experience: which experience and whose experience matter? I already referred to Freire's notion of unfinishedness and his dialectical understanding of epistemology and ethics. But there are limits in Freire, too. While social class is still very important, there are many other aspects of equity that need to be considered. However, there is a lot from his work that can inspire us and guide us.

Finally, many people today live and learn in under-resourced, inequitable, or authoritarian contexts, where educational hope can feel fragile. From your philosophical and literary perspective, what message of hope would you offer to educators, students, and communities who are struggling to imagine a more humane future?

Since I was young, I encountered these problems, unfortunately. I also encountered them when I migrated to Canada. And also, in many other places I visited and presented at. My point is that, unfortunately, the restrictions you mentioned are not new. The lesson for me is that we cannot give up. I have encountered educators who have made a difference in students' lives. We can never afford, especially now in such fragile times, to give up reasonable hope. There are genuine activists and genuine educators who work hard for equitable transformation! We need lots of hope and courage, and above all, we need to support each other; we can't let the rampant individualism conquer us.

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