Facing epistemic uncertainty: characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of a discursive contextualist approach to philosophy of education
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1. Introduction

Increasing doubts over what some writers term the 'metanarratives of modernity' (cf. Lyotard, 1984) within Western philosophy have also brought the significance of philosophy to educational thinking into question. These 'major stories' traditionally served to legitimize philosophy of education's - and other societal institutions' - tasks and ways of fulfilling those tasks. "If the Enlightenment idealist and humanist narratives have become bankrupt and must be abandoned...", Peters and Lankshear propose. "wherein can legitimacy reside?" (Peters & Lankshear, 1995, p. 11).

These developments have met various responses amongst philosophers of education. Several authors hold that the radical doubts raised a way of thinking "that puts everything 'up for grabs' (cf. Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 26). Others respond less dramatically. Whilst, for example, Blake, Smeyers, Smith and Standish (1998), too, think that doubts concerning philosophy of education's traditional justificatory frameworks have led to an 'intellectual paralysis', they do not regard this as the end of the possibilities of educational thinking. They rather approach it as a challenge "to find new resources for thinking again" (Blake et al., 1998, p. 5).

However the developments described above may be interpreted, philosophy of education - as a discipline - is clearly under pressure, which has raised questions about its central tasks and possibilities. These questions are at the core of this dissertation in which I will be examining the recent uncertainties in philosophy of education - in relation to proposals for their resolution. This, for the most part against the background of the reception of recent insights in epistemological thinking.

The practice of questioning its own 'raison d'etre' is nothing new to philosophy of education. The discipline has always - especially since it became detached from an independently developing empirical educational discipline - been engaged in (re)formulating its central tasks and philosophically acceptable manners of fulfilling those tasks. The continuous investigation of philosophers of education into the 'methodology' of their discipline need not surprise us. As Heyting shows, relating "methodological considerations to fundamental epistemological questions" (Heyting, 2001, p. 1) has always been characteristic of philosophy in
general. Raising questions about its core business and methods in the light of new epistemological developments appears to be at the very heart of philosophy.

In the remainder of this introduction I will briefly deal with a number of historical approaches to what are considered the central tasks of philosophy of education, and the epistemological developments that can be associated with these approaches, in order to offer a historical background for and theoretical framing of the research questions that are dealt with in the next chapters.

2. The continuous (re)formulation of the tasks and possibilities of an independent philosophy of education

In the early years of its establishment as an independent academic discipline in the nineteen twenties, Dutch academic pedagogy was characterized by a strong philosophical and normative orientation (Mulder, 1989, p. 14; p. 247-48). Philosophy was considered central to educational thinking, formulating the basic principles to serve as point of departure for the construction of educational theory and, from there, educational practice. These basic educational principles were, for the most part, grounded in - either religious, or secular - ideology. What was considered to constitute 'good' education, or upbringing, ultimately depended on personal belief systems, it was thought. Hence, a 'good' pedagogy needed to take belief-systems as its starting point. As stated by the Dutch philosopher of education Waterink: "Particularly in pedagogy, which deals with fostering human beings into ideal adults, towards-an ideal outlook on life, moral standards are paramount to academic endeavor [transl.: RvG]"¹ (1959, p.191-192).

However, in the course of the 20th century a change set in. The 'scientific model' of academic endeavor - derived from the natural sciences - came to be regarded as the model for all academic disciplines; and so also for the behavioral sciences (Slife & Williams, 1995, p. 177). The success of the natural sciences - that had enabled the building of bridges, the treatment of diseases, and the genetic modification of plants - led to a situation in which sound academic endeavor was increasingly regarded as synonymous with natural science. Educational science, following psychology, focused ever more on this 'scientific model', which eventually led to the development of the increasingly independent

¹ In Dutch: "[J]uist bij de paedagogiek, waar het gaat om het vormen van mensen tot de ideale volwassenheid, tot de ideale levenshouding, daar moet juist deze normatieve situatie in de wetenschappelijke activiteit een eerste plaats hebben".
discipline of empirical educational science (cf. among others Levering, 2003, p. 95; Van IJzendoorn, 1997, p. 78; and 2002, p. 29).

As empirical educational science gained independence, developing its own methods for the provision of scientifically substantiated answers, educational philosophy developed as a more or less autonomously operating discipline with an international orientation. However, the matter of what could be expected of this so-called 'philosophy of education' was under discussion from the very start, not in the least within philosophy of education itself. From the moment it became detached from empirical educational science, the (re) formulation of philosophy of education's central tasks and ways in which the discipline might fulfill these, in a philosophically substantiated manner, appeared to be one of its central themes.

It appeared obvious that questions concerning the values of education, at the very least, belonged exclusively to the domain of philosophy of education. Such questions were evidently beyond the realm of empirical educational science. The second undisputed area of expertise concerned the investigation of matters of a conceptual nature, i.e. of the language of education. Empiricists were engaged with how 'reality' is; how that 'reality' is discussed was left to philosophy. The central tasks of the field of philosophy of education, then, seemed clear. How, precisely, these tasks were to be interpreted was, however, not that clear at all.

Philosophers of education who welcomed and promoted an empirically oriented educational science, turned in the main to philosophical approaches such as the 'Wiener Kreis' logical positivism, that sought to arrive at unambiguous philosophical claims by means of rigorous linguistic and logical analyses. Their aim was to settle philosophical issues once and for all through freeing language from its conceptual ambiguities, metaphysical lumber and logical inconsistencies. In their view, philosophy of education was to abstain from metaphysical speculation on the nature and content of education. Because metaphysical speculations could not be rigorously tested through the available and methodologically accepted philosophical apparatus, they were considered meaningless. Philosophers of education, it was believed, should only 'make use of the one infallible philosophical tool: logic, and restrict themselves to the study of the sole philosophically accessible object of research: language. Empirical educational science, in its turn, was to focus on the development and testing of facts in order to arrive at the constitution of an objective representation of educational reality.

An example of this so-called 'positivist' approach is formed by philosophers of education who tried to formulate unequivocal definitions of educational concepts by means of linguistic analysis. The first to
introduce this analytic-philosophical method in the Netherlands was Stellwag. Dissatisfied with the lack of unambiguous educational language-use, she tried to clarify a set of concepts that she identified as relevant to all involved in education, yet frequently interpreted variously leading to unnecessary misunderstandings and confusion of tongues (Stellwag, 1970; 1973). Ultimately, Stellwag aimed at formulating universally valid definitions of all foundational educational concepts - to be used by all educationalists, including empiric educational researchers (cf. Meijer, 1997, p. 245).

A related approach can be found in the effort of philosophers of education to contribute to the analysis and constitution of logically consistent systems of claims concerning education, and of the foundational statements in which these systems were grounded (see, for example, Brezinka, 1972; and Stellwag, 1962; 1966). In this respect Stellwag identified distinct 'educational philosophies' that varied according to the ideological point of departure (cf. Heyting, 2006, p. 136). She considered it the task of the philosopher of education to elaborate and clarify such ideologically anchored philosophies: "According to Stellwag, philosophers of education should temper their ambitions, and restrict themselves to mutually comparing those ideological systems and their derived educational prescriptions, and to working out whether they met conceptual and logic standards" (Heyting, 2006, p. 136).

In both approaches outlined above, the philosopher is expected to provide clarity by eliminating on the one hand conceptual ambiguities and, on the other, logical inconsistencies. Clearly, conceptual matters are at the very heart of this analytic philosophy of education. This by no means implies that questions concerning the values of education were ignored but, rather, that any philosophical engagement with such questions needed to be localized at the level of language. In practice, analytic engagement with questions of value took on different forms. When it came to, for instance, education, Peters considered it futile to attempt to make clear a distinction between conceptual issues and questions of values, because the concepts involved - first and foremost that of 'education' itself - are inherently value-laden (see Peters, 1967). In his view, the formulation of rules for the correct use of a concept such as 'education' immediately necessitates an understanding of what is considered valuable in education (cf. Meijer, 1983, p. 325).

Whilst other philosophers of education - such as Soltis and Langford - subscribed to Peters' idea that educational concepts are inevitably value-laden, they argued that philosophical analysis should restrict itself to the neutral identification of the normative moment in education. Such an analysis would help practitioners to make explicit and
deliberate normative educational choices (cf. Meijer, 1983, p. 331). A further task for analytic philosophers was the formulation of rules for the correct use of the concepts involved in such processes of normative deliberation. Examples of this form of conceptual analysis are Dutch philosophers of education Spiecker's (1991) and Steutel's (1992) studies of language use regarding, respectively, moral emotions (such as guilt, love, and care), and virtues (such as self-control, justice, and reliability); contributions to a research project on 'moral education'. Finally, analytic engagement with values in education has taken the form of logical analysis of decision-making processes, in which justification of educational claims is sought in supposedly deeper-lying, normative, basis assumptions (cf. Peters, 1974). The issue, then, is not to determine the value of such assumptions, but to evaluate the logical consistency of the process of justification. These analyses are not located at the level of distinguished concepts or claims, but at the level of systems of claims and how within these systems, claims are mutually interrelated.

The idea that philosophy should confine itself to the level of language is not exclusive to positivists. Looking back, this notion proves to be characteristic for a broad meta-philosophical tradition that endures to this day. Following Bergmann, Rorty (1967) refers to a 'linguistic turn' in the history of philosophy that marked the beginning of a so-called 'linguistic philosophy', characterized by the view that "philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use" (Rorty, 1967, p. 3). The huge significance of this meta-philosophical revolution for philosophy of education becomes apparent when we look at the important, perhaps even dominant, role that analytic philosophical approaches have played in international philosophy of education over the past decades.

From the very first, the positivist way of thinking met a great deal of resistance, especially from philosophers of education whose interpretation of the tasks and methods of philosophy of education came closer to the humanities (Geisteswissenschaften) than the natural sciences. Whilst concurring that philosophy of education should primarily deal with the study of educational language-use and questions concerning values in education, these authors did not subscribe to the positivist distinction between philosophy of education and empirical educational science, whereby the former should focus exclusively on analysis and the latter on describing the 'facts' of education.

Their main objection concerned the positivist idea that it was possible to objectively describe and explain educational reality - in the same way as natural reality. These philosophers of education regarded
education as an essentially human reality that cannot be adequately studied from the outside. Rather, the study of education should be a matter of understanding it from within (Verstehen); in its totality, as it appears to us in our actually lived experience - its inherent values included. Moreover, since the interpretation of educational phenomena necessary to achieve such an understanding clearly requires a hermeneutic-philosophical engagement with the reality of education, philosophy of education could not confine itself to the analysis of educational language-use.

Furthermore, following Dilthey, these hermeneutically oriented philosophers of education pointed out that any description - and most certainly descriptions of an essentially human reality as education - needed to be understood as a historically anchored (and hence not objective) representation, implying that even 'empirical facts' could not possibly be separated from the contingent historical perspective from which they are formulated. Consequently, empirical claims were also regarded as essentially normatively colored, making it impossible to sharply distinguish these from purely conceptual claims.

These ideas not only affected hermeneutically oriented philosophers of education's attitude towards empirical educational science, they also had an impact on the authors' views regarding engagement with values. The hermeneutic approach, after all, required that values, too, were studied and clarified as historical contingent phenomena. It was no longer considered meaningful to reflect on values separated from the actual historical context in which they are formulated. The study of values in education thus necessitates engagement with history.

The epistemological insights put forward by the hermeneutic school in philosophy of education were not lost on representatives of the positivist approach to educational science. Along the way, they lost some of their initial rigidity. The notion that the empirical acquisition of knowledge, too, was inevitably grounded in a specific theoretical - and hence conceptual - framework, necessitated empirical scientists to abandon their claim of contributing to the construction of an objective picture of external reality. A new understanding of empirical science as a concept-driven activity was now required. Empirical scientists had to accept that, henceforth, they could do little more than formulate hypotheses on how reality might be and, at best, identify false hypotheses to be rejected (cf. Popper). Similarly, analytic philosophy could no longer hold on to its concept of language as an independent, objective apparatus that, used correctly, might help eradicate philosophical problems altogether. In this respect, philosophers like the latter Wittgenstein and Ryle, who conceived of language as conventional, as an instrument as well as a product of (inter-)human activity, proposed that linguistic analysis could ultimately
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contribute little more than the clarification of current language-use in hopes of eliminating potential misunderstandings; analytically confined to the temporal and spatial context of actual language-use.

The growing reserve within analytic philosophy of education is exemplified by Peters and Hirst. Although they ascribed a categorical and universal status to the descriptions of 'education' (Peters, 1967) and 'liberal education' (Hirst, 1974) they developed early in their careers, they later came to interpret the significance of these educational concepts as culture-specific (albeit, in their view, not completely devoid of objectivity) (cf. Winch, 2006, p. 58). Consequently, both Peters and Hirst abandoned their initial aim of formulating the necessary conditions for any possible interpretation of education. As put by Winch: "[they] re-oriented their view of philosophical analysis to a modest, but more achievable goal of providing a conceptual framework for thinking about a central human institution such as education [italics added]" (Winch, 2006, p. 58).

Developments in the area of epistemology, then, appear to have compelled philosophers of education to temper their pretenses. Both the analytic and the hermeneutically oriented camp resigned themselves to the fact that philosophy of education could only offer local and temporal descriptions of, either, current educational language use, or of an historically situated educational reality. It seemed as if philosophy of education would have to relinquish its traditional ambition to formulate and justify general and universally valid educational prescriptions once and for all.

It was the so-called 'Kritische Paedagogik' (critical pedagogy) of the nineteen seventies and eighties, with its roots in the Kritische Theorie of the Frankfurter Schule, that responded to the growing reticence over the feasibility of a prescriptive role for philosophy of education. Representatives of the Frankfurt school of philosophical and social thought, such as Habermas, had pointed out that current approaches to academic endeavor ignored the fact that the acquisition of knowledge was not only situated in spatial and temporal contexts, but also driven by societal conflict, personal and/or group interests and dispute (cf. Kunneman, 1986, p. 194). Against this background, critical theorists argued, that academics could not turn their back on their social responsibilities. If research and theory were not only incapable of achieving objectivity, but also plainly partial, and in that sense political, then one was socially and morally obligated to go beyond mere description. Academics were to be held accountable for their influence on society, and required to contribute consciously to societal transformation.

Critical pedagogy aligned with the hermeneutically oriented philosophy of education in its rejection of (neo-)positivism in the human
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sciences. In these authors' view, the positivist approach wrongly maintained that the scientific methods of the natural sciences were the only objective and hence only valid methods for research. Any form of research driven by a specific knowledge-governing interest and could, therefore, not possibly be objective. In the case of (neo-)positivism, these authors contended, (scientific) research was driven by technical interests aimed at controlling human behavior, resulting in a specific, politically colored, description of educational reality. Besides epistemological, practical objections were also advanced. Since positivists interpreted human behavior solely in terms of causes and effects, human actions - for instance, in education - were reduced to a purely instrumental matter, thus dehumanizing society.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, hermeneutically oriented educational science had a more humane outlook on education because its interpretative claims did not aim to predict and control human action, but to conduct a social dialogue within the human sciences; a dialogue that acknowledged individual human experiences, motives and intentions. However, critical pedagogues did not consider the hermeneutic approach to the human sciences flawless. Because of the descriptive nature of its knowledge-claims, a hermeneutic approach to educational research was not able to critically examine the social injustices that characterized actual social communication, Critical pedagogues argued. Hermeneutic educational research was thought to be governed by the practical interests existent in everyday - historically and culturally situated - educational practice, as a result of which the knowledge it produced was too affirmative in character. Consequently, hermeneutic research could only reproduce social realities, and would never be able to contribute to societal transformation. In addition, hermeneutically oriented philosophy of education was considered too philosophical and too speculative, underestimating the value of rigorous empiric-analytic educational research.

Critical pedagogy wanted to show that existing approaches to educational science had been blind to the idea that any form of academic endeavour served specific interests and neglected others, and were thus oblivious to the ideological nature of academic enquiry. Critical pedagogy's main focus was that the acquisition of knowledge was inevitably involved in the construction and/or reproduction of a specific societal structure, and hence also in the creation and/or preservation of the unequal distribution of power and resources within societies (cf. Kunneman, 1986, p. 230-231). Against this background, and in the light of the critical pedagogic normative point of departure that all societal institutions ought to serve emancipatory interest, these authors held that
philosophy of education had a responsibility to (strive to) influence and transform societal processes that instigated or reproduced forms of social injustice. In this, one of the tools philosophy of education had at its disposal was the critical analysis of existing societal structures and their underlying mechanisms of power - critique of ideology.

Apparently, critical pedagogy did not aspire to formulate 'objective' judgments of (social) reality. Rather, it endeavored to formulate a philosophically justifiable way of judgment-making that was resistant to the power-mechanisms underlying current society. It was Habermas (1981) who was inspirational to many authors on this point. He strived for a form of consensus that he thought could be reached on the basis of a dominion-free dialogue; a dialogue driven, ultimately, by emancipatory interests. Such a dialogue should embrace empiric-analytic, hermeneutic-interpretative, and ideological-critical knowledge claims, as long as none of these dominated the dialogue (cf. Miedema, 1997, p. 132-133). With its plea for a dominion-free dialogue, and the critical role it could play within such dialogue, critical pedagogy regained the prescriptive ambitions that had been so characteristic for philosophy of education in its early years.

The idea of a dominion-free dialogue can be regarded as an attempt to break free from the cultural and historical situatedness - brought to our attention by the Geisteswissenschaften - and interest-governed perspectivity - identified by the Kritische Theorie - of any claim. It was a methodological point of departure that would lead to - in a philosophical sense - universally justified claims. In that respect it resembled Rawls' idea of the so-called 'original position'; a point of view not contaminated by social interests, that could serve as a starting point for designing a model for a just society (Rawls, 1971).

Rawls' idea of the 'original position' has been of major importance for analytic philosophy of education from the nineteen seventies to the present day. The 'original position' is thought-experiment that requires the participant to think of a hypothetically impartial position in society from which the rules for a just society should be drawn up. According to Rawls, the 'original position' had to meet two criteria. Firstly, the participant should only want to serve his/her own interests in the way most beneficial to him/herself. Secondly, this participant would be placed behind a so-called 'veil of ignorance', meaning that he/she would have no knowledge whatsoever of the characteristics and interests of the person or group in society that he/she represents (d'Agostini, 2003). According to Rawls, this thought-experiment enables the formulation of ethico-political claims whereby the criterion of egocentrism rules out the possibility of sacrificing the interests of individuals on behalf of those of the majority, whilst the 'veil of ignorance' ensures that no specific persons or groups are
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 favored over others. Rules drawn up from the 'original position' were therefore supposed to be 'just', by definition. To give an example: a person in the 'original position' would have no knowledge of his or her sex. This, in combination with the person's egocentric nature, would keep him or her from drawing up rules that would privilege the interests of either women or men. At least for as far as equality of the sexes would be concerned, the rules drawn up by such a person would have to be 'just'.

Rawls tried to break loose from the partiality of human judgment-making, just as Habermas did. Both thought to have found the solution in a specific procedure that would enable the formulation of philosophically justified claims without any form of partiality. Habermas and Rawls provided tools for philosophers of education to return to their initial prescriptive ambitions; not, now, by taking a normative stance, but by carefully following a supposedly politically neutral procedure. However, as philosophers of education realized only later, these procedures were, in themselves, grounded in conventional and hence value-laden concepts (such as 'emancipation' and 'justice'), thus privileging specific social interests in their turn.

From the nineteen eighty's onwards, many philosophers of education continued to hold on to the idea that they should engage with conceptual questions as well as with questions concerning value. However, they had to give up all hopes of ever being able to formulate general and final answers to such questions (for instance, regarding conceptions of 'the good life', or the correct use of educational concepts) in a scientifically justified way. The idea of being philosophically impotent instigated a broad adherence to the thought that we are confronted and left with an incommensurable diversity of 'conceptions of the good life' or conceptual frameworks. According to Rorty, philosophers had to recognize that the fruit of their labor inevitably gives expression to a specific local value-laden point of view - in Rorty's case a liberal perspective. This recognition, Rorty argued, would inevitably lead us to a position in which that very point of view is put into perspective, and in which the existence and potential value of alternative viewpoints is acknowledged; a paradoxical position that he refers to as 'anti-anti-ethnocentrism' (Rorty, 1991, pp. 203 ff.).

Some philosophers of education went even further; not only acknowledging the incommensurable diversity philosophy was left with, but even considering it their task to explicate and celebrate this diversity. An example can be found in Rang's plea for different forms of pluralism; a concept that he defines as an appreciative attitude towards a controversial form of diversity - for instance in the areas of morality, science, art, religion, or culture (cf. Rang, 1993, p. 19-21). In the nineteen
eighties and nineteen nineties, such an attitude was apparent across various academic domains. In philosophy of education it was expressed by authors who can be associated with epithets such as: 'feminism' (among others Noddings, 1984; Roland Martin, 1985; and Nicholson, 1990); 'postmodernism' (among others Usher & Edwards, 1994; and Aranowitz & Giroux, 1991); and 'multiculturalism' (among others Feinberg, 1996).

At the same time, however, the idea that we are left with an incommensurable diversity of viewpoints has been contested from the start (see among others Carr, 1998; and Siegel, 1997). According to Siegel (1997), this idea is epistemologically incorrect, because it relies on the rejection of any claim to universal validity. Siegel starts by pointing out that such a rejection is logically inconsistent, because it presupposes a claim to universality validity itself - i.e. the claim that any claim to universal validity would be invalid (p. 175). But that is not his only counterargument. In his mind an even stronger objection can be made to the substantiation of the idea that any claim to universality is philosophically incorrect by arguing that our judgments are inevitably bound by a specific - and in that sense restricted and excluding - conceptual framework. Siegel posits that there are numerous examples of claims (for instance in mathematics or physics) of which the validity and correctness extend far beyond the boundaries of the frameworks in which they were developed or made. The law of universal gravitation, one might argue in this respect, also applied to Francis Bacon - even though he did not share the conceptual perspective of Newton, who first formulated the law (Bacon died seventeen years before Newton was born). According to Siegel, this shows there is no reason to think that the acceptance of an incommensurable diversity of particular perspectives is unavoidable, and that we should end our search for universal knowledge claims.

Besides epistemological objections, more practical objections have more recently been uttered. Some philosophers have warned that embracing pluralism can only result in "a rampant relativism, leading to nihilism and social anomie" (Kvale, 1992, p. 8, cited in Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 26). The major concern is that an ongoing focus on diversity puts social cohesion under pressure. In this view, 'pluralism' is merely a fancy name, used to give a positive twist to processes of social disintegration. Once again, there is a call for direction and unity. Especially after the terrorist attacks on New York of September eleventh 2001, there seems to be a growing fear that liberal society as we know it will fall apart, as social groups are seen to become increasingly and ever more diametrically opposed to each other. The result is a growing demand for factors that might serve to bind all members of society together.

The search for something that might unite all people within liberal
societies - societies that by definition, to a certain extent, accept and even appreciate various forms of diversity - is also evident in the work of many present-day philosophers of education. (see f.i. Callan, 1997; and Burtonwood, 2006). They are motivated by the idea that, in order to keep social structures from collapsing, all individuals within those structures need to share some common ground. Against this background, Spiecker en Steutel (1995; 2003), for instance, investigate which common values need to be maintained by, or even imposed upon, members of pluralist societies in order to protect social unity.

Regardless of the way these objections to pluralism are valued or interpreted, the recent call for unity unmask pluralism as another value-laden and thus disputable point of departure. The thought that any possible starting-point is arbitrary increasingly forces itself upon us, (one again) bringing philosophy of education's tasks and methods into question. The constantly evolving discussion, set in with the 'linguistic turn', over the issues philosophy of education should address, and how these issues should be addressed, now seems to be becoming ever more divergent. Against this background, it seems that we need to abandon the hope of ever being able to develop an unequivocal understanding of the tasks and possibilities of philosophy of education as an academic discipline.

3. Research-questions
In the remainder of this dissertation, I will deal with the question of what may yet be expected of a future philosophy of education. What tasks can be assigned to philosophy of education? What role will philosophy of education, considering the (epistemological) issues it now appears to be confronted with, be able to play within the broader field of educational science? And, what is its relation to educational practice? The questions to be dealt with in the following chapters have been formulated against the background of these central questions. Because the answers to the questions in each chapter provide the backdrop to the questions raised in the consecutive chapter, this dissertation can be read as a continuous story. However, chapters two, four, six, and eight were written as independent research-articles, each dealing with their own research-questions, and, hence, they can also be read independently from the other chapters.

In the next chapter (chapter two) I investigate how present-day philosophers of education have responded to the rejection of the foundationalist model of justification, that is considered to be at the heart of the radical epistemological doubts expressed by a vast group of philosophers in the past decades. It turns out these so-called antifoundationalist philosophers of education do not interpret such epistemological issues and the undecidability - i.e. the impossibility of ever
being able to formulate final answers to educational questions - these imply as an intellectual obstacle, but rather as an opportunity to formulate an alternative outlook on the tasks of philosophy of education. Throughout history, the continuous reinterpretation of philosophy of education's central tasks - partly instigated by developments in epistemology - has always been related to changing ideas about the discipline's practical relevance. Against this background, chapter two will also investigate what the authors included in this study present as the practical relevance of philosophy of education in light of their renewed interpretations of its central tasks.

The antifoundationalist approach reconstructed in chapter two is, of course, not the only possible response for philosophy of education facing epistemic uncertainty. Moreover, it has been criticized from the very beginning. In order for me to be able to develop my own position in the debate, in chapter three I look more closely into the epistemological arguments behind the idea of an inescapable epistemic uncertainty. Consequently, I elaborate on an epistemological approach defended by a group of philosophers of education that accept the idea that knowledge will always be - to a certain extent - uncertain, but that respond to this idea in more moderate way than the antifoundationalist philosophers of education examined in chapter two. I examine the tenability of this position. In the light of this examination, and the conclusions of chapter two, I conclude that it seems fruitful to further examine contextualism as a possible acceptable epistemological position that enables us to deal with the idea epistemic uncertainty. The question is raised what may still be expected from a philosophy of education incorporating a contextualist epistemological position.

In chapter four I explore one way for a philosophy of education that takes a contextualist approach towards epistemic uncertainty to still contribute to educational thinking in a constructive and meaningful manner. In this chapter, the ultimate undecidability regarding educational questions, that is implied with the idea of epistemic uncertainty, forms the starting point. I systematically investigate how this undecidability can be dealt with in a philosophically acceptable, and at the same time meaningful way, through the use of irony as a philosophical tool. In response to two recent ironic approaches in general philosophy, I develop my own ironic approach, based on the idea of dynamic contexts of justification. At the end of the chapter the three different approaches to a so-called 'ironic philosophy' are presented and the contributions that may be expected of these approaches are illustrated with reference to debates around the educational issue of 'students at risk'.

Chapter four yields ideas concerning how human meaning-
making, inter-human communication, and the relation between language and reality can be understood in light of a dynamic-discursive interpretation of contexts of justification. These ideas are relevant to the overarching aim of this dissertation. In chapter five I examine how these ideas may contribute to reaching that aim, i.e.: developing an understanding of epistemic (un)certainty and considering the consequences of such an understanding for (the tasks and possibilities of) philosophy of education. At first, I show that using a dynamic-discursive interpretation of context enables me to repudiate the reproach of relativism that contextualist approaches to epistemic uncertainty usually seem to evoke. Secondly, based on the idea of dynamic-discursive contexts of justification, I sketch the contours of my own discursive interpretation of epistemic uncertainty. However promising the developed epistemological approach may be, at the end of the chapter I argue that it is vulnerable to the reproach of being too conventionalist, which instigates me to further examine the ideas behind the epistemological approach.

In chapter six these ideas will be explored in greater depth by applying them to the debate concerning 'differential academic language proficiency in schools'. The question is raised what it means for a human subject to learn (to use) a language. Consecutively, I investigate what inferences can be drawn from the answer for dealing with differences in academic language proficiency. It appears that a subject learning to use a language may best be understood as an active participant in an ongoing negotiation concerning how the world is, which implies a specific interpretation of differential academic language proficiency that may also appeal to a different way of dealing with this issue in, for instance, educational policy.

Chapter six gives us an insight into how the active role of participants in communicative processes can be understood. It shows how communicative contexts are transformed with every – successful – contribution to the communication made by a speaker. In chapter seven, these insights are used to show that a discursive epistemology cannot be regarded as conventionalist, at least not in any conservative sense. Furthermore the consequences of such an understanding of evolving communicative contexts a drawn for an idea of what it means to speak of the 'growth of knowledge' in academic disciplines. In light of the findings, it is argued that understood from the perspective of a discursive epistemology the commitment of individual academics plays an important role in the development of knowledge within academic disciplines, leading me to conclude that 'commitment' may also have re-entered philosophy of education.

Making use of the insights developed in the consecutive chapters,
in chapter eight I investigate how the concept of 'commitment' should, in this respect, be interpreted, how an apparently committed philosophy of education may be understood, and what might be expected of such a philosophy of education.

In the concluding chapter (chapter nine) I shall begin by summarizing the successive findings from the preceding chapters. Subsequently, I will draw out the conclusions concerning what I have come to see as a philosophically acceptable, and fruitful epistemological position for philosophy of education, and I will elaborate on the possible consequences of such a position for an understanding of the tasks and possibilities of a future philosophy of education and its relation to educational practice.

4. References
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INTRODUCTION


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