

BEYOND NEUTRAL REFORM: AN EXAMINATION OF IMPLICIT ANTHROPOLOGIES CONCERNING EDUCATOR ROLES, CARE, AGENCY, AND CRITICAL THINKING IN TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Contemporary educational reforms are often presented as neutral, technical and evidence-based processes aimed at improving quality, efficiency and measurable learning outcomes. However, every reform also carries implicit assumptions about the human being: about what learners are, what educators should become, which forms of knowledge are valued, and what kind of relationship between educator and learner is considered desirable. This paper examines the implicit anthropologies embedded in educational reforms, with particular attention to educator roles, care, agency and critical thinking in teacher–student relationships. The objective is to analyse how reform-oriented discourses may reshape the relational and ethical foundations of education, especially when teaching is reduced to implementation, learning to performance, and critical thinking to a measurable skill. The methodology is based on theoretical and conceptual analysis, drawing on philosophy of education, critical pedagogy, ethics of care and democratic educational theory. The paper argues that teacher–student relationships are not secondary to reform implementation, but constitute one of the primary sites where reform assumptions become visible and operative. The results of the analysis indicate four tensions: between educator as implementer and educator as relational professional; between student as measurable performer and student as developing subject; between care as support mechanism and care as ethical relation; and between critical thinking as individual cognitive competence and critical thinking as dialogical, relational and democratic practice. The paper concludes that educational reforms cannot be considered anthropologically neutral. If reforms aim to foster critical thinking and student agency, they must protect the relational conditions in which questioning, dialogue, trust, reflection and responsible autonomy can emerge.

Keywords: educational reform; implicit anthropology; teacher–student relationship; care; agency; critical thinking; critical pedagogy; teacher professional development.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of educational reform is typically articulated through the lens of enhancement, encompassing the pursuit of enhanced outcomes, the optimisation of teaching efficacy, the establishment of enhanced accountability frameworks, the development of more pertinent curricula, the cultivation of novel competencies, the promotion of innovation, the fostering of inclusivity, and the preparation of students for future social and economic demands. It is important to note that such aims are not unimportant. It is incumbent upon educational institutions to respond to changing social circumstances, new technologies, democratic challenges and the needs of learners. Nevertheless, discourse pertaining to reform is often presented as if it were merely technical in nature. The argument is posited that the resolution of educational issues can be achieved through the implementation of enhanced standards, more explicit outcomes, improved measurement techniques, a strengthened management framework, and enhanced implementation efficiency. The present paper takes a different starting point, namely the assumption that educational reform is never merely technical. It can be posited that every reform presupposes an image of the human being. This phenomenon suggests an answer to questions such as: What is a learner? What is an educator? What counts as knowledge? The question therefore arises of what it means to become educated. Which forms of autonomy, responsibility, and participation are valued? The present study seeks to explore the manner in which the relationship between educator and learner is both promoted and impeded. In this sense, reform is always anthropological. It constructs, legitimises and normalises certain images of the student, the teacher and the educational process.

The problem addressed in this paper is therefore not whether educational reform is necessary, but rather whether reform can be understood as neutral. In circumstances where the language of reform is dominated by standardisation, accountability and measurable performance, there is a tendency for these factors to influence the configuration of educational relationships in a specific manner. The educator may be

positioned primarily as an implementer of externally defined outcomes; the learner may be positioned as a performer whose progress is captured by indicators; care may be reduced to a support mechanism for achievement; and critical thinking may be framed as a transferable competence detached from the relational and ethical conditions of its development. The objective of this paper is to examine how implicit anthropologies embedded in educational reforms influence educator roles, care, agency and critical thinking in teacher–student relationships. The central argument is that critical thinking cannot be adequately understood only as an individual cognitive skill. It is also a relationally embedded and pedagogically mediated capacity. It is developed within educational environments where learners are recognised as capable of questioning, interpreting, judging and acting. Such environments demand more than mere curricular statements regarding critical thinking; they necessitate teacher–student relationships founded on dialogue, trust, care and shared inquiry. The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, it delineates the methodology of theoretical and conceptual analysis. Secondly, it develops the conceptual framework through selected contributions from Dewey, Freire, Noddings and Giroux, complemented by contemporary discussions on agency and educational purpose. Thirdly, the analysis is presented in the form of four conceptual tensions, which encapsulate the primary results. Finally, it discusses the implications for teacher professional development and reform-oriented educational practice.

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper is a theoretical and conceptual study. It does not present empirical data from classrooms, interviews or policy documents. Instead, it analyses the conceptual assumptions that shape educational reform discourses and their implications for teacher–student relationships. The methodology combines three interconnected approaches. First, the paper uses conceptual analysis to clarify the meanings and relations among four key concepts: educator role, care, agency and critical thinking. These concepts are frequently used in educational theory and policy, but their meanings change depending on the broader anthropological assumptions within which they are placed. For example, agency may mean individual choice within predefined options, or it may refer to the capacity to participate critically and responsibly in shaping one's world. Care may mean emotional support for learning outcomes, or it may refer to an ethical relation that recognises the learner as a whole person. Second, the paper uses interpretive theoretical analysis. It reads selected works in philosophy of education, critical pedagogy and ethics of care as resources for identifying alternative anthropologies of education. Dewey's account of reflective thought is used to connect critical thinking with inquiry, uncertainty and the suspension of immediate judgement [1]. Freire's critique of banking education is used to analyse how authoritarian or transmission-based models position the learner as passive and the teacher as owner of knowledge [2]. Noddings' ethics of care is used to show that education requires continuity, trust and attention to the learner as a person [3]. Giroux's democratic theory of schooling is used to connect education, agency, student voice and public life [4].

Third, the paper applies these theoretical insights to reform contexts. The aim is not to evaluate one specific national reform, but to identify recurring tendencies in contemporary reform language: the prioritisation of measurable outcomes, standardised competences, accountability mechanisms, efficiency, employability and evidence-based implementation. These tendencies are analysed in relation to the implicit images of educators and learners that they produce.

The research questions guiding the analysis are:

- 1 What implicit anthropological assumptions about educators and learners are embedded in reform-oriented educational discourses?
- 2 How do these assumptions reshape educator roles, care and agency in teacher–student relationships?
- 3 Under what relational and pedagogical conditions can critical thinking develop as more than an individual cognitive skill?

The results are presented as conceptual findings. They do not claim statistical generalisability, but they offer an analytical framework that may be useful for future empirical studies, teacher education programmes and reform evaluations.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Reform and implicit anthropology

The expression “implicit anthropology” refers here to the usually unspoken image of the human being embedded in educational theories, policies and practices. Educational reform always contains such

images. A reform that defines learning mainly through measurable outcomes implicitly presents the learner as a performer whose development can be captured through indicators. A reform that defines teaching mainly through delivery and implementation implicitly presents the educator as a technician or manager of learning processes. A reform that places strong emphasis on adaptability may implicitly value the learner who adjusts to existing social and economic conditions more than the learner who questions them. This does not mean that outcomes, standards or accountability are inherently problematic. Educational institutions need forms of structure, evaluation and shared responsibility. The problem arises when these elements become dominant to the point that they narrow the meaning of education. This tension is also visible in contemporary critiques of outcome-oriented education. Biesta argues that the dominance of measurement can narrow the meaning of good education by reducing educational value to what can be assessed and compared [5]. If the human subject of education is reduced to performance, adaptation or employability, the relational, ethical and democratic dimensions of education become secondary. In such a context, critical thinking may be celebrated in policy language while the actual structures of schooling discourage questioning, uncertainty and student voice. A central task of educational theory is therefore to make these implicit anthropologies visible. This is especially important because reforms often operate through attractive and apparently neutral terms: quality, excellence, innovation, competence, inclusion, efficiency. These terms are not empty, but they are also not innocent. They require interpretation. The question is not only whether a reform improves learning outcomes, but also what kind of learner, educator and educational relationship it promotes.

3.2 Dewey: reflective thought and the conditions of inquiry

Dewey's understanding of thought is important because it prevents critical thinking from being reduced to quick judgement or isolated reasoning skills. Reflective thought involves the deliberate examination of the grounds of belief. It requires the capacity to remain with uncertainty, to suspend immediate conclusions, to seek further evidence and to test possible meanings [1]. In this sense, critical thinking is not simply a technique; it is a habit of inquiry.

This has important implications for teacher–student relationships. If reflective thought requires inquiry, doubt and the examination of evidence, then education must create situations in which students are allowed to ask questions, make hypotheses, reconsider assumptions and connect problems with experience. A classroom dominated by correct answers, speed, compliance and fear of error cannot easily cultivate reflective thought. Dewey's account suggests that critical thinking depends on the organisation of experience. It grows when learners encounter meaningful problems and when educators guide inquiry without replacing the learner's thinking with ready-made conclusions.

Dewey also helps us see why reforms focused exclusively on external results can be limited. If educational quality is judged only by visible products, test results or short-term performance indicators, then the deeper development of intellectual habits may be overlooked. The aim of education is not simply that students produce correct answers, but that they develop habits of careful judgement, inquiry and intelligent action [1].

3.3 Freire: dialogue, agency and the critique of banking education

Freire's critique of the banking model of education directly addresses the teacher–student relationship. In banking education, the teacher is positioned as the one who knows, speaks, chooses and acts, while students are positioned as those who receive, listen, adapt and store information [2]. This model is not merely a pedagogical technique; it is an anthropology. It assumes a passive learner and an authoritative educator who owns knowledge. It also separates knowledge from the lived world of learners. Against this, Freire proposes problem-posing education, in which teachers and students become co-investigators of reality. The teacher does not disappear, nor does authority become meaningless. Rather, authority is reconfigured so that it supports freedom, dialogue and inquiry rather than domination. In this view, agency is not simple individual choice; it is the capacity to read, interpret and transform the world. Critical thinking emerges through dialogue, problematisation and reflection on one's situation [2].

Freire's contribution is central to the argument of this paper because it shows that the teacher–student relationship is not external to critical thinking. It is one of its conditions. A reform that promotes critical thinking while preserving pedagogical relationships of passivity, compliance and unilateral transmission remains contradictory. If students are expected to think critically, they must be treated as subjects capable of participating in knowledge construction.

3.4 Noddings: care as ethical relation

Noddings' ethics of care adds another essential dimension. Education is not only cognitive or political; it is also relational and ethical. Care is not a soft addition to teaching, nor merely emotional warmth. It is a relation of attention, response and recognition. For Noddings, caring cannot be achieved through formula; it requires address and response, sensitivity to context and continuity in relationships [3].

This is particularly relevant for reform contexts that attempt to standardise educational processes. Care cannot be fully standardised. It depends on knowing students, understanding their situations and responding to their needs as persons. Noddings argues that teaching requires long periods of time and continuity, because trust is built relationally [3]. When reforms fragment teaching, increase administrative burdens or define teacher effectiveness primarily through measurable outcomes, they may weaken precisely those relational conditions that make meaningful learning possible. Care also has implications for critical thinking. Students are more likely to take intellectual risks, express uncertainty, question assumptions and participate in dialogue when they experience the classroom as a space of recognition rather than humiliation. Care does not remove challenge. On the contrary, caring teaching can be demanding because it takes the learner seriously. But it challenges students within a relationship that communicates: you matter, your thinking matters, and your development matters.

3.5 Giroux: democratic schooling and critical agency

Giroux situates education within the broader struggle for democracy and public life. Schooling is not merely preparation for labour markets; it is also a public sphere in which young people learn forms of citizenship, voice, responsibility and agency [4]. When education is reduced to training, democracy is weakened because students are not invited to understand and shape the forces that govern their lives. For Giroux, critical pedagogy connects knowledge, power and student voice. It asks how schools can enable students to become critical social agents rather than passive consumers of information or adaptable workers. This perspective is particularly important for analysing reforms that use the language of competence and innovation while avoiding questions of power, ethics and democracy.

In relation to the teacher–student relationship, Giroux helps us understand that agency is both individual and social. Students need opportunities to speak, interpret, disagree, imagine alternatives and participate in shared inquiry. Teachers, in turn, need professional agency to make pedagogical judgements rather than merely implement externally prescribed procedures. A democratic reform must therefore support the agency of both educators and learners.

4 RESULTS: FOUR CONCEPTUAL TENSIONS

The analysis identifies four main tensions through which implicit anthropologies of reform become visible in teacher–student relationships.

4.1 Educator as implementer vs educator as relational professional

Many contemporary reforms position teachers as key agents of change, but often define their role in terms of implementation. Teachers are expected to deliver curricula, apply standards, use evidence-based methods, collect data, monitor progress and ensure measurable outcomes. While these tasks may be part of professional work, they do not exhaust the meaning of teaching. The implicit anthropology behind the implementation model presents the educator as a technical agent whose main responsibility is to execute reform objectives. Professional judgement is limited to choosing efficient means for externally defined ends. In this model, teacher agency is narrowed. The issue of educator agency is particularly important in reform contexts, since teachers do not merely implement policy but interpret and enact it within concrete institutional and relational conditions [6]. By contrast, the relational-professional model views educators as persons who interpret, judge and respond. They are not simply transmitters of content or managers of outcomes, but pedagogical professionals who create conditions for inquiry, care and student agency. This also relates to Schön's understanding of the reflective practitioner, according to which professional work involves situated judgement rather than the mechanical application of rules [7]. Their authority is not eliminated, but it is ethically and dialogically oriented. It is authority in support of learning and freedom, not authority against the learner. This tension has direct consequences for critical thinking. Teachers who are treated only as implementers may find it difficult to cultivate critical thinking, because critical thinking requires pedagogical flexibility, dialogue and responsiveness. A teacher cannot foster student agency while being denied professional agency.

4.2 Student as measurable performer vs student as developing subject

A second tension concerns the image of the student. Reform language frequently emphasises learning outcomes, competences, achievement, progress and performance. These are not irrelevant, but when they become dominant, the student may be reduced to a measurable performer. This anthropology values the student primarily through evidence of achievement. Learning becomes visible when it can be measured; development becomes meaningful when it can be compared; success becomes tied to performance indicators. The danger is that aspects of education that are slower, less measurable and more personal—curiosity, moral judgement, intellectual courage, dialogue, care and democratic participation—become marginal. An alternative anthropology views the student as a developing subject: unfinished, relational, capable of inquiry, dependent on others yet oriented toward autonomy. This view does not reject assessment, but it refuses to identify the student with measurable outputs. It recognises that learning involves identity, confidence, voice, responsibility and the capacity to relate knowledge to the world. Critical thinking depends on this second view. A student cannot be expected to become a critical thinker if treated mainly as an object of measurement. Critical thinking requires the student to experience himself or herself as a subject whose questions and interpretations matter.

4.3 Care as support mechanism vs care as ethical relation

A third tension concerns care. In reform contexts, care may appear through the language of student support, wellbeing, inclusion or intervention. These are valuable and necessary. However, care can be reduced to a mechanism for improving performance: students are supported so that they can achieve predetermined outcomes more effectively. Noddings' perspective challenges this reduction. Care is not only a strategy for achievement; it is a moral orientation of education [3]. It requires attention to the learner as a person, continuity of relationship and responsiveness to context. It cannot be fully replaced by protocols, although institutions can create conditions that make caring relationships more or less possible. The distinction matters because critical thinking involves vulnerability. To think critically is to risk being wrong, to expose one's assumptions, to question what is familiar and to enter dialogue with others. Without trust, students may avoid such risks. Therefore, care is not opposed to critical thinking; it is one of its enabling conditions.

4.4 Critical thinking as competence vs critical thinking as relational practice

The fourth tension concerns critical thinking itself. Reform documents often define critical thinking as a key competence. This recognition is positive, but it can also narrow critical thinking if it is treated as a transferable skill independent of context, content and relationships. Dewey, Freire and Giroux suggest a richer understanding. Dewey connects thinking with inquiry and suspended judgement [1]. Freire connects critical consciousness with dialogue and problem-posing education [2]. Giroux connects critical pedagogy with democratic agency and public life [4]. From these perspectives, critical thinking is not only something the individual possesses; it is something enacted in relation to problems, others and the world. The relational view of critical thinking includes several dimensions: the cognitive ability to analyse and evaluate; the ethical disposition to listen and respond; the dialogical capacity to exchange reasons; the affective courage to remain with uncertainty; and the democratic capacity to connect personal experience with social questions. Such thinking cannot be produced only through instruction in skills. It requires a classroom culture in which inquiry is valued and students are recognised as participants.

Table 1. Conceptual tensions in reform-oriented teacher–student relationships

<i>Reform-oriented tendency</i>	<i>Implicit anthropology</i>	<i>Relational risk</i>	<i>Alternative orientation</i>
Teaching as implementation	Educator as technical executor	Reduced teacher agency	Educator as relational professional
Learning as measurable performance	Student as performer	Narrowed view of development	Student as developing subject
Care as support for outcomes	Learner as recipient of intervention	Instrumentalisation of care	Care as ethical relation
Critical thinking as competence	Thinking as individual skill	Detachment from dialogue and agency	Critical thinking as relational-democratic practice

5 DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that the teacher–student relationship is not a marginal or private dimension of education. Rather, it occupies a central position in the actualisation of educational reform. Policies do not enter the classroom as abstract documents; they materialise through expectations, roles, assessment practices, time structures, professional responsibilities and definitions of success. These elements have a profound influence on the manner in which teachers and students interact with one another. Whilst a reform may officially promote critical thinking, if it concomitantly increases standardisation, reduces teacher autonomy and prioritises measurable performance, it may weaken the conditions under which critical thinking develops. This is not merely a contradiction in policy language; it becomes a contradiction in everyday pedagogical practice. Teachers are expected to encourage students to engage in critical thinking, while facing pressure to provide predefined answers. Students are expected to become autonomous learners, yet this autonomy is achieved by continuously measuring their progress against external criteria. Educational institutions must demonstrate a commitment to fostering interpersonal relationships, particularly in the context of constrained temporal resources.

A key implication of this is that teacher professional development must evolve beyond the mere training of teachers to implement reforms. The purpose of the present text is to provide a framework to support teachers in the interpretation of the anthropological and ethical assumptions of reforms. Educators should therefore be given opportunities to interrogate the images of the learner that are promoted in such settings. The nature of the agency in question is therefore of particular interest. The question that is being posed here is concerned with determining which forms of care are either supported or obstructed. Equally important is clarifying the understanding of critical thinking presupposed in this context. It is imperative to recognise that such inquiries do not represent mere abstract luxuries. These factors exert a significant influence on classroom practice, assessment methods, communication with students, and the organisation of learning.

A secondary implication pertains to the domain of educational leadership. If care, agency and critical thinking are relational, then the organisation of schools is a matter of consequence. A plethora of factors have been identified as having a significant impact on the establishment of meaningful teacher–student relationships. These include timetables, class size, administrative demands, assessment regimes and teacher workload. It is not sufficient for an educational institution to merely articulate critical thinking as a goal; it must allocate time and create spaces conducive to inquiry, dialogue and reflection.

A third implication pertains to the curriculum. A curriculum that aims to foster critical thinking should not only include critical thinking outcomes. The curriculum should provide meaningful problems, opportunities for interpretation, discussion of controversial issues, connection with students' experiences and reflection on social realities. In Deweyan terms, thought is said to grow from genuine problems and inquiry [1]. In the context of Freirean pedagogy, the act of education is defined as a process of liberation, which occurs when learners engage in a critical investigation of their relationship with the world around them, as opposed to a mere reception of information [2].

A fourth implication pertains to the assessment process. If assessment is confined to the evaluation of final products, correct answers or measurable outputs, it may serve to obscure the processes through which critical thinking develops. Assessment should also encompass reasoning, questioning, dialogue, revision, interpretation and the ability to justify judgements. This does not entail the abandonment of standards; rather, it signifies the alignment of assessment with a more profound comprehension of education.

The analysis suggests that care and critical thinking should not be separated. Within certain educational frameworks, the concept of care is frequently linked to the provision of emotional support, while critical thinking is often associated with the act of rational challenge. This separation is misleading. It is precisely because critical thinking demands such rigorous intellectual effort that students require nurturing relationships. Critical thinking requires students to confront uncertainty, examine assumptions and engage with perspectives that differ from their own. A caring teacher does not seek to insulate students from challenges; rather, the teacher cultivates a foundation of trust that renders challenge educationally meaningful.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined how educational reforms, often presented as neutral and technical processes, carry implicit anthropological assumptions about educators, learners and the teacher–student relationship. Through theoretical and conceptual analysis, it was argued that reforms shape not only

curricula and institutional procedures, but also the relational conditions of education. The primary conclusion drawn from this analysis is that educational reforms are not inherently anthropologically neutral. The construction of specific roles for educators and learners is a fundamental aspect of this paradigm. The influence of these factors is evident in the manner in which teachers are perceived as either implementers or relational professionals, in the treatment of students as either performers or developing subjects, in the recognition of care as either support or an ethical relation, and in the framing of critical thinking as an isolated competence or as a dialogical and democratic practice.

The paper's contribution is the proposal of a conceptual framework for analysing reform through four interrelated dimensions: educator role, care, agency and critical thinking. The framework has applications in the fields of teacher education, professional development and policy analysis. It is argued that this approach encourages educators and researchers to consider not only the efficacy of reforms, but also the human relationships that they engender. The findings of the study indicate that, in the context of teacher professional development, educators require more than procedural training. It is imperative that conceptual and ethical spaces are established within which reforms can be interpreted, professional agency reflected upon, and the manner in which relationships with students facilitate or impede critical thinking examined. The findings suggest that critical thinking cannot be produced merely by naming it as a competence. The establishment of such an environment necessitates institutional conditions that foster dialogue, instil trust, facilitate professional judgment, and ensure the articulation of student perspectives.

It is recommended that future research endeavours apply this conceptual framework to specific reform documents, teacher education programmes, or classroom practices. Empirical studies could examine how teachers interpret reform expectations in relation to care, agency and critical thinking, and how students experience these relational conditions. The execution of such research would result in a more profound comprehension of the operational mechanisms of implicit anthropologies in practical contexts.

Whilst acknowledging the necessity for educational reform, it is submitted that such reform should be judged by more than efficiency and measurable performance. A reform that is genuinely educational should pose the following questions: what kind of persons does it help to form? What kind of relationships does it make possible? And does it enable learners and educators to participate critically, responsibly and humanely in the world they share?

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