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## NEUTRALITY IN EDUCATION: CHALLENGING THE CALL FOR TEACHER'S NEUTRALITY WITH THE CONCEPT OF JUDGEMENT

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### Abstract

Starting point of this paper is the online portal *Neutral Teachers*, which was launched by the far-right party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) to enlighten students, parents, and teachers about the principle of neutrality that civil servants have to follow. As most teachers in Germany are civil servants, the principle of neutrality applies to their positions. In a first step, the German discussion around teacher's neutrality will be analysed with a focus on the debate about the *Beutelsbach Consensus* (1977), an agreement between teachers and researchers, which still has a lot of influence on how the German debate around teacher's neutrality is conducted. This consensus is also used by the authors of *Neutral Teacher* to legitimate their website. In a second step, the discussion around teacher's neutrality in the U.S.A. and Canada will be considered with reference to two different positions, which are nearly 20 years apart and illustrate an interesting shift in the debate. In the third step, Hannah Arendt's conception of judgement will be explained with a special focus on the general standpoint and the enlarged mentality because these concepts offer a significant alternative to the call for teacher's neutrality. The importance of judgement and its value for the teacher's profession and a thing-centred teacher education will be outlined further in the conclusion.

**Keywords:** teacher's neutrality, Hannah Arendt, judgement, teacher education.

## Introduction: The Call for Teacher's Neutrality

Recently, there has been a discussion around the neutrality of teachers in Germany. The far-right party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) has launched the online portal *Neutral Teachers*<sup>1</sup> to enlighten students, parents, and teachers about the principle of neutrality<sup>2</sup> that civil servants have to follow. As most teachers in Germany are civil servants, the principle of neutrality applies to their positions. The slogan of the website claims that “the principle of neutrality guarantees the autonomy of generations”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the website shows five bullet points concerning their understanding of neutrality:

- Students have to form their own opinions
- For the freedom of expression
- Violations against the principle of neutrality are a characteristic of totalitarian regimes
- We say No against a climate of fear in the classroom
- School is no place of assimilation, school is a place of lived democracy.<sup>4</sup>

The main concerns of the website's authors are the freedom of opinion and the atmosphere in school, which should not be fearful nor conforming. However, not only far-right voices are concerned about the principle of neutrality. The teacher's union underlines “teachers do not have to be neutral”<sup>5</sup> and several publications of the state's centre for civic education (cf. Wieland, 2019, and Wrase, 2020) aim at explaining the principle of neutrality and its limits.

But why is this debate even important? Why should we pay attention to the ramblings of the right? Because the argumentation concerning the teacher's neutrality matches the current discourse on teacher education well: Teachers are supposed to concern themselves rather with skills and methods instead of a deep understanding of their subject matter. In addition to that, teachers are expected to use diagnostical tools and seemingly *neutral* tests to diagnose their students' performance and behaviour. Some researchers even want to understand the teacher as a diagnostician who mainly conducts

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.neutrale-lehrer.de/>

<sup>2</sup> However, civil servants are primarily obliged to stick to the constitution. The principle of neutrality mainly becomes relevant short before elections because teachers are not allowed to advocate for one party, but they are supposed to support students in finding their own political position.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by author, original quote: “das Neutralitätsgebot als Garant für mündige Generationen”.

<sup>4</sup> Translation by author, original quote:

- “Schüler müssen sich eine eigene Meinung bilden
- Für eine freie Meinungsäußerung
- Verstöße gegen das Neutralitätsgebot sind Kennzeichen totalitärer Regime
- Nein zu einem Klima der Angst im Klassenzimmer
- Schule ist kein Ort der Anpassung, Schule ist ein Ort gelebter Demokratie”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. GEW, 2024: “Lehrkräfte müssen nicht neutral sein”.

tests (cf. Schrader & Helmke, 2014). There is a growing mistrust in the teacher's profession and their abilities to evaluate and secure their students' output (cf. Rojahn, 2025). This mistrust is used to legitimate the introduction of more tests, which are supposed to solve the problem of the subjective perspective of the teacher (cf. Rojahn, 2024; Korsgaard, 2024, pp. 70-82). What is lacking in that debate is that the insecurities and surprises that the teacher's everyday-life entails, cannot be deleted or solved by those tests. The teacher also needs to be able to judge when an unknown situation occurs.

In this paper, the German discussion around teacher's neutrality will be analysed with a focus on the debate about the *Beutelsbach Consensus* (1977), an agreement between teachers and researchers, which still has a lot of influence on how the German debate around teacher's neutrality is conducted. This consensus is also used by the authors of *Neutral Teacher* to legitimate their website. In a second step, the discussion around teacher's neutrality in the USA and Canada will be considered with reference to two different positions (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005; Maxwell, 2023), which are nearly 20 years apart and illustrate an interesting shift in the debate. In the third step, Hannah Arendt's conception of judgement will be explained with a special focus on the general standpoint and the enlarged mentality because these concepts offer a significant alternative to the call for teacher's neutrality. The importance of judgement and its value for the teacher's profession will be outlined further in the conclusion.

### **Teacher's Neutrality and the *Beutelsbach Consensus***

Neutrality comes from the Latin "ne uter", which means "none of each" or "non-interference" (Schneider/Toyka-Seid, 2025). It is a term that we usually use in relation to states that do not interfere in other state's politics (cf. Hornblower, 2016). In Germany there is the colloquial saying "I am Switzerland". It is used when two people are fighting and then a third person is asked for their opinion but does not want to take sides in the conflict. What this example shows is that neutrality means to not get involved. It could even be understood as not caring about other people's conflicts. Neutrality marks a position that demonstrates distance from others.

In the example of *Neutral Teachers*, it means that teachers should not engage too much with their students' opinions. They should not interfere with their students' ideas on politics. The website refers back to an old discussion among teachers and researchers of civic education, which is called the debate around the *Beutelsbach Consensus*. The *Beutelsbacher Konsens* (cf. Wehling, 1977) is a consensus that was established between teachers and researchers of political science and civic education in a conference in Beutelsbach in 1976 and it has since then, supposedly, become "a cornerstone in the German Didaktik of political education and continues to be a topic of debate and inspire discussions" (Christensen & Grammes, 2020, p. 2). The *Beutelsbach Consensus* consists of

only three principles that are supposed to be a guideline for all schoolteachers, particularly those who teach civic education:

1. Prohibition against overwhelming the student [...;]
2. Treating controversial issues as controversial [...;]
3. Giving weight to the personal interests of students (ibid., p. 3–4).

The first principle is part of most didactic conceptions: students should not be overwhelmed by a topic in the sense that they will lose their openness towards a topic if the teacher overwhelms them. This kind of “overwhelming” leads to a closure of interaction and a withdrawal of the student. It could also be understood as a misuse of the teacher’s power: the teacher belittles the students and tries to impose his/her ideas on the students. The second principle refers to scientific and political discussions around issues and underlines that teachers need to know about the controversial debates around a topic. When a teacher shares the topic with students, it also needs to be presented as a controversial topic. The principle emphasizes the importance of teacher’s connectedness to their subject and the research community that it belongs to. To follow the third principle, teachers need to listen to and respect their student’s interests, to then teach them how to analyse their situation in relation to political discussions. However, the idea is also that students learn how to engage in political activities to take a stand for their interests. The third principle is usually abbreviated as *student orientation*, the second principle is referred to either as *controversiality* or *contrast* – but sometimes it is also connected to the idea of neutrality – and the first principle is usually called *prohibition to overwhelm or indoctrinate*. In the discussion around the *Beutelsbach Consensus* there is always the fear that one of the principles will supersede the others. Thus, there needs to be a certain balance between student orientation, controversiality and the prohibition to indoctrinate.

In the original version of the *Beutelsbach Consensus* (cf. Wehling, 1977) the student’s opinion is only mentioned in the first principle, the prohibition to indoctrinate. It does not play a role in the other two principles. However, in the interpretation of the consensus by the authors of *Neutral Teachers* the student orientation and the student opinion are emphasized in all three principles.

The second principle is explained by *Neutral Teachers* as follows: “Opposing opinions must be treated balanced in the classroom. This enables students to develop a comprehensive understanding of complex topics and to reflect on their own points of view”.<sup>6</sup> What is completely missing in this interpretation of the second principle on “controversiality” is that the teacher also has a “correction function” (“Korrekturfunktion” in Wehling, 1977, p. 179). In the case that the student discussion on a topic is very one-sided and blind towards opposed or varying standpoints, the teacher has to take those

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<sup>6</sup> Translation by author, original quote: “Im Unterricht müssen gegensätzliche Meinungen ausgewogen behandelt werden. Dies ermöglicht den Schülern, ein umfassendes Verständnis für komplexe Themen zu entwickeln und ihre eigenen Standpunkte zu reflektieren.”

positions over. In the *Beutelsbach Consensus* the second principle even claims that the teacher is responsible to introduce new perspectives to their students that have been alien to them before – for example, because of their political or socioeconomic background (cf. *ibid.*).

In today's scientific discussion around the *Beutelsbach Consensus* the third principle is usually referred to as "location of interests" ("Interessenslage" in Gloe & Oeftering, 2020, p. 102) instead of "student orientation" because the focus is on the reflection and analysis of the student's interests to then find their location in the political landscape. On the website *Neutral Teachers* the wording of that principle has also been changed: "Students must be able to form their own opinions. Teachers should provide students with the necessary tools and information to enable them to form informed and reflective opinions."<sup>7</sup>

This comparison of the website with its stated legitimization framework reveals a clear shift: whereas the *Beutelsbach Consensus* is focused on the position of teachers and their responsibility for students and subject matter, the *Neutral Teachers* platform focuses solely on student orientation. Although student orientation is already central to the *Beutelsbach Consensus*, it is not yet as overarching as it is on the *Neutral Teachers* platform. In the website's interpretation of the *Beutelsbach Consensus*, all three principles are presented with a focus on the opinions of students, which should under no circumstances be corrected by teachers. It is striking that the statements on the platform hardly mention the subject matter but focus primarily on the possibility that teachers could restrict students' opinions. The emphasis on students, their positions, and perceptions is a consequence of increasing individualization in schools and teacher training. The focus on competencies leads to students being perceived solely as individual carriers of skills and deficits.

One of the most prominent and influential definitions of competence was developed by Franz E. Weinert for the OECD-project *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (DeSeCo): "A competence is defined as the ability to meet individual or social demands successfully, or to carry out an activity or task" (OECD, 2002, p. 8). Competencies are mainly about showing a performance or about solving problems. Weinert also underlines the importance of the active learning time, the "time on task" (Weinert, 2014, p. 24). Performance and time investment are the two main characteristics of the competence concept. Since Weinert is concerned with criteria that can be measured and compared over the long term, these remain at a superficial level that ultimately cannot say anything about *understanding* a subject matter. These criteria are more useful for showing whether students are attempting to

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<sup>7</sup> Translation by author, original quote: "Schüler müssen in der Lage sein, sich selbst ihre Meinung bilden zu können. Lehrer sollten Schülern die notwendigen Werkzeuge und Informationen zur Verfügung stellen, um eine informierte und reflektierte Meinungsbildung zu ermöglichen."

engage with a subject, at least externally. Moreover, as the concept of competence comes from a psychological and empirical research tradition, it is focused on the isolated individual and its inherent abilities.

Two of Weinert's students, Friedrich-Wilhelm Schrader and Andreas Helmke, connected the concept of competence with the idea of the "teacher as a diagnostician" (cf. Schrader & Helmke, 2014) with the hope to minimize the insecurities when teachers try to evaluate their student performance (cf. p. 50f). Since then, the concept of diagnostics has been an unquestioned cornerstone of the German teacher education system:

Already in the 1980's Schrader and Helmke (1987) described teachers' ability to judge students' prerequisites adequately as a vital basis for an instruction, which fits to students' abilities, and up to now diagnostic competences are regarded as a core aspect of teachers' expertise (Ohle & McElvany, 2015, p. 5).<sup>8</sup>

The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (abbreviated as KMK) promoted Weinert's, Schrader's and Helmke's research since the so-called PISA shock in 2000 (cf. KMK, 2001). What the concept of competence, the idea of diagnostics and the call for teacher's neutrality share is the disregard of the subject matter. Instead, they overemphasize the student, their abilities and perspectives. The controversiality of the subject matter and the fear of indoctrination was usually the starting point of the discussion around teacher's neutrality or impartiality – at least, in the context of the North American debates (cf. Kelly, 1986; Maxwell, 2023).

### **The Fear of Indoctrination: Connections to the North American debate on Teacher's Neutrality**

The teacher educator Faith Agostinone-Wilson makes a strong case against the "Cult of Neutrality In the Teacher Education Classroom" (2005). Surprisingly enough, her article also starts with reference to a platform which is similar to *Neutral teachers*:

The relatively new website, NoIndoctrination.org was a subject of curiosity on my part. This is a site where students can anonymously submit reports of 'bias' they experienced in a college course. The schools' names, course numbers and professors are identified in these posts (p. 2).

While *Neutral Teacher* focuses on high schools and only hands out "advice" how to report seemingly non-neutral teachers, the website NoIndoctrination.org<sup>9</sup> concentrated

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<sup>8</sup> Another example for underlining the importance of diagnostics in teaching would be: "teachers' key tasks include making diagnoses, as they are challenged to meet students' diverse learning needs and adapting their teaching to students with heterogeneous academic abilities as well as multiple interests and motivations" (Klug, Gerich & Schmitz, 2016, p. 185).

<sup>9</sup> The website is not available anymore. However, it is thought to be the predecessor of websites like "Professor Watchlist", which is still available (cf. Flaherty, 2016).

on college courses and offered a platform to publicly denounce teachers and their courses.

Agostinone-Wilson quotes some of the comments on NoIndoctrination.org to exemplify an attitude of neutrality and centrism that she has observed in many of her students' writings, and she points out that "the ideology of neutrality serves as a way of creating a passive, or spectator-oriented, citizenry. The ultimate aim of neutrality discourse, particularly in social studies curriculum, is to keep the status-quo intact" (ibid., p. 11). She underlines this point even further: "what appears neutral is actually a reinforcement of the status quo" (ibid., p. 5). Agostinone-Wilson also identifies a connection between neoconservative education politics and the promotion of standardized testing that links well to my argumentation concerning the connection between neutrality and competence orientation:

Because Paige [the U.S. Secretary of Education from 2001-2005] and other neoconservatives in charge of educational policy within the U.S. have defined their values as common sense or even neutral and just, the implication is that any and all critics must have an 'agenda'. The language of high-stakes testing, accountability and results seduces many liberals with its centrist disguise (ibid., p. 3; PR).

Here she also draws attention to the idea of centrism that is often related to neutrality. She explains that the view of centrism usually is used to deny structural problems (cf. ibid.) and to harmonize between opposing perspectives (cf. ibid., p. 4).

The teacher educator not only illustrates why it is inadvisable to defend neutrality in education through the writings of her students and the NoIndoctrination.org-posts but also through Trosset's *Grinnell study* (1998), which gathered students' responses and their attitudes towards "open discussion and critical thinking" at Grinnell College (cf. Trosset, 1998). Agostinone-Wilson summarizes some of Trosset's findings conveniently:

Another key finding of the Grinnell study was that students felt they had a right not to be challenged. One student commented on their survey that they had the right to 'say what I believe and not have anyone tell me I'm wrong' (p. 47). Radical relativism, where everything becomes reduced to an 'opinion' is another common misconception about what should happen in a discussion (p. 48). The fact that 84% of freshmen students chose the statement 'it is important for the college community to make sure all of its members feel comfortable' over 'people have to learn to deal with being uncomfortable' demonstrates the mindset we often face as educators (p. 49)." (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005, p. 6)

The outlined radical relativism corresponds to the untouchability of students' opinions that the platform *Neutral Teachers* advocates for. The demand to neither challenge nor question students' opinions seems to be a shared key characteristic of both platforms, *Neutral Teachers* and NoIndoctrination.org. However, what is even more important for both websites is the fear that there are teachers that supposedly only teach their opinions and thus indoctrinate students.

Bruce Maxwell (2023) takes up the fear of indoctrination as one of “Three False Assumptions about Neutrality and Impartiality in Teaching” (p. 620). He explains clearly what indoctrination entails:

For an instructional act to count as indoctrination it must, it seems, meet three criteria. It has to (i) be concerned with imparting beliefs that have political or sectarian content, (ii) employ nonrational instructional methods, and (iii) involve deliberateness. To indoctrinate someone, in other words, means not just to tilt a person toward certain partisan or sectarian beliefs. As commentators on indoctrination in education have long pointed out, ‘indoctrination’ implies *intentionally* imbuing a person with certain partisan or sectarian beliefs using noneducational methods. (ibid., p. 620; italics in original)

Indoctrination, as Maxwell outlines clearly, does not happen incidentally. It also signifies that the teacher uses “noneducational methods” and thus s/he acts in a way that is contradictory to pedagogical standards. To accuse teachers of indoctrination therefore means to accuse them of not doing their job anymore because teaching and indoctrination – at least, using Maxwell’s definition – exclude each other.

Maxwell also offers a helpful differentiation between neutrality and impartiality (with reference to Kelly, 1986): “‘neutrality’ refers to the act of *teacher positioning* with regard to a controversial issue. ‘Impartiality’, by contrast, refers to the *pedagogical approach* the teacher adopts in dealing with controversial issues” (ibid., p. 610; italics in orig.). Neutrality means that the teacher tries not to imply his/her position or opinion on a certain topic while teaching it. Impartiality is aimed at the teacher’s position towards controversial issues in general, so if the teacher avoids teaching controversial issues or not. Maxwell makes this differentiation because he wants to defend impartiality as a pedagogical tool and disagrees with Agostinone-Wilson’s fierce dismissal of teacher’s neutrality:

the idea that pedagogical impartiality necessarily serves the status quo appears to be based on a fuzzy distinction between what should and what should not be considered a controversial issue. The view that teachers need to choose between neutrality, or never disclosing their personal views to students, and committedness, or always doing so, is a false dichotomy that obscures the educational value of using teacher disclosure as a flexible pedagogical tool. (Maxwell, 2023, p. 625)

As much as Maxwell’s argumentation is convincing, he did not include another problematic view of teacher’s neutrality: that teachers *should* always stay neutral when they teach. While Agostinone-Wilson 20 years ago made a strong argument against asking teachers to be neutral because she thought it to be a passive “reinforcement of the status quo” (p. 5), Maxwell questions this ethical objection to teacher’s neutrality and mentions two more, which he wants to challenge: that it is pedagogically undesirable and “that teacher impartiality is not even *possible*” (p. 608). However, the platform *Neutral Teacher* now not only claims that it is very much possible to be neutral for teachers

but that it should be their default position. This extreme position that calls for total neutrality of teachers is a claim that Maxwell's study does not discuss.

I want to argue that this shift between Agostinone-Wilson (2005) and Maxwell (2023) is not a coincidence but that in the almost 20 years between the two positions the educational perspective has shifted, in general, to the "language of high-stakes testing, accountability and results" (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005, p. 3)<sup>10</sup> as well as neutrality. With the OECD's large-scale assessment studies on competencies (such as PISA, TIMSS, etc.) and the resulting promotion of standardized testing in schools a pseudo-vocabulary of neutrality and "quasi-objectivity" (Thompson & Wrana, 2019, p. 172; my translation) has found its way into the educational discourse. The testing culture creates an atmosphere of cleanness, objectivity and neutrality, as well as it gives the impression of not being normative (cf. *ibid.*, p. 172-174). Instead of negating the normative and critical moments in teaching by enforcing teacher's neutrality, I want to argue for a stronger involvement and a clearer positioning of teachers in relation to their subject matter but also students' opinions, by exemplifying the faculty of judgement and its significance for teaching. I follow Biesta's assessment on the importance of judgement for teachers:

To put it bluntly: a teacher who possesses all the competences teachers need but who is unable to judge which competence needs to be deployed when, is a useless teacher. Judgements about what needs to be done always need to be made with reference to the purposes of (Biesta, 2012, p. 15).

However, I develop my idea of teacher's judgement not from Aristotle (cf. Biesta, 2012; 2013) but from Hannah Arendt.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Foundation of Judgements: A General Standpoint instead of Neutrality**

Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1992) focus on the faculty of judgement and its importance for political judgements. I want to underline that the Arendtian concept of judgement can be also understood as a core concept for the teacher's profession because it focuses on the mediation between the general and the particular without overemphasizing one over the other. What is crucial for Arendt's concept of judgement is the "general standpoint" (Arendt, 1992, p. 71). It is a position that is developed when

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<sup>10</sup> Gert Biesta (2015) pinpoints this development "learnification of education": "'Learnification' encompasses the impact of the rise of a 'new language of learning' on education. This is evident in a number of discursive shifts, such as the tendency to refer to pupils, students, children and even adults as 'learners;' to redefine teaching as 'facilitating learning,' 'creating learning opportunities,' or 'delivering learning experiences;' or to talk about the school as a 'learning environment' or 'place for learning.'" (p. 76).

<sup>11</sup> Even though Arendt is also influenced by Aristotle, she developed her concept of judgement mainly with reference to Immanuel Kant. Her idea of judgement puts a strong emphasis on the mediation between the general and the particular and is, therefore, very valuable for teachers.

a person frees oneself from their personal conditions and imagines the perspectives of many other people on a certain topic (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 71-73). However, it is not a neutral position that is distanced and disconnected from others, but quite contrary, it is a position that is very involved and interested in the other perspectives. The general standpoint is a position from which we mediate between our private perspective and many other imagined standpoints. To take over a general position, we need to mediate between the general and the particular. For example, a teacher mediates between their subject (as a system of knowledge) and the particular example that s/he chose to teach. The teacher, therefore, takes over a general standpoint in relation to their subject and its underlying research.

However, Arendt emphasizes with Kant that people's ability to gain a general standpoint relies on the *sensus communis*, the sense which connects humans with each other:

This *sensus communis* is what judgment appeals to in everyone, and it is this possible appeal that gives judgments their special validity. The it-pleases-or-displeases-me, which as a feeling seems so utterly private and noncommunicative, is actually rooted in this community sense and is therefore open to communication once it has been transformed by reflection, which takes all others and their feelings into account. [...] one can never compel anyone to agree with one's judgments [...]; one can only 'woo' or 'court' the agreement of everyone else. And in this persuasive activity one actually appeals to the 'community sense'. In other words, when one judges, one judges as a member of a community. (Arendt, 1992, p. 72; italics in original)

The common sense is closely connected to Arendt's concept of "men in the plural": "Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience" (Arendt, 1951/2017, p. 625). Because there are many people that inhabit the world, we need to communicate and engage with others. With the statement "when one judges, one judges as a member of a community" (Arendt, 1992, p. 72) Arendt underlines that we learn how to judge in community with others.<sup>12</sup> We can also enlarge the community that we

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<sup>12</sup> In her essay *Responsibility under Dictatorship* (1964/2003) Arendt also analyses the problem, when the community around you does not use their faculty of judgement anymore because the community members confuse consent with obedience: "All this sounds so plausible that it takes some effort to detect the fallacy. Its plausibility rests on the truth that 'all governments,' in the words of Madison, even the most autocratic ones, even tyrannies, 'rest on *consent*,' and the fallacy lies in the equation of consent with obedience" (p. 46, italics in orig.). However, she still emphasizes that it is possible to use the faculty of judgement even under dictatorship: "the nonparticipants, called irresponsible by the majority, were the only ones who dared judge by themselves" (p. 43). Arendt claims that their motivation to not participate in the totalitarian system was "because they were unwilling to live together with a murderer-themselves" (p. 44). On the level of thinking, they were unwilling to live in the presence – or in community – with a murderer. Thus, the question of the imagined community that one chooses is still important even under dictatorship.

refer back to. What helps us to imagine the position of others, is the “enlarged mentality”, which Arendt explains as the ability to let “one’s imagination [] go visiting” (Arendt, 1992, p. 43; PR). She quotes that wording from Kant’s *Zum Ewigen Frieden* (*Perpetual Peace*), in which he explains the right to visit (cf. Kant, 1795/2008, p. 21f). Kant’s hope is that the “right to visit” will enable a friendly attitude towards people of different national contexts and thus it will help enabling world peace. Arendt takes this idea to an imaginative level: that we can use our imagination to train our minds to go visiting.

Another concept that Arendt explains, which is crucial for the general standpoint is “impartiality”: “You see that *impartiality* is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint” (Arendt, 1992, p. 42). The position of the general standpoint is not a superior and non-involved position that rules over the other viewpoints. Impartiality is an attitude towards other standpoints that requires openness and interest because to get to an impartial position one first needs to listen to other standpoints with an open mind. However, the impartial, general standpoint is just an intermediate step on the way to form a judgement. The viewpoint from that standpoint needs to be compared to the particular case which will be judged. The general and the particular need to be mediated to form a judgement, which means neither the general nor the particular can be overvalued.

I am stressing this point because in the discussion around neutrality, the general is overemphasized or rather the general and the particular are completely separated. The idea of neutrality that is brought forward in the case of *Neutral Teachers* has nothing to do with impartiality of the general standpoint. Neutrality of teachers is thought to be an uninvolved position, from which teachers just observe their students while they utter their opinions freely. It could also be added here that opinions are – philosophically – just preconceptions and prejudices, so they are only the starting point for processes of judgement (cf. Polcik, 2024). During a process of judgement those preconceptions are questioned and confronted with the conceptions of others, and in the school context usually also challenged by scientific arguments. Thus, to ask a teacher to not discuss or criticize their students’ opinions means to ask a teacher not to do their job: teaching their subject matter and taking over educational responsibility. For both tasks, they need their faculty of judgement.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Judgement as a Core Concept of a Thing-Centred Teacher Education**

The call for neutrality in education should always make us cautious, or rather attentive, because it is usually a sign for the rejection of responsibility. Arendt already noticed that in her essay on the “Crisis in Education”, in which she points out the loss of authority that is a consequence of teacher’s rejection of the responsibility for the world, namely

their subject matter (cf. Arendt, 1958/1961, p. 190). Arendt also explained that next to the responsibility for the world (the subject matter), the teacher takes over responsibility for the child's becoming (cf. *ibid.*, p. 185f). In her essay she was mainly concerned with the refusal of the responsibility for the world that she saw emerging from a certain adoption of progressive education.

With the rise of pedagogical diagnostics in education which try to measure students' performance, as well as their behaviour, I want to claim that also the responsibility for the child's becoming is being rejected. The teacher's profession is then neither founded on subject knowledge nor on pedagogical abilities. Diagnostical tests promise neutrality – a neutrality that any teacher could never achieve. They seem to offer a neutral way of assessment, in which the teacher is reduced to a test conductor who measures neutral skills: “Such competences are often presented as general, as relatively open to different views about education, as relatively neutral with regard to such views, and also as relatively uncontested” (Biesta, 2012, p. 10). When the teacher is reduced to a test conductor s/he is ripped of both of her main responsibilities: the responsibility for the world and for the child's becoming.

In their *Defence of the School* (2013), Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons integrated Arendt's idea of the teacher and her double responsibility into their school idea. With regard to the discussion about neutrality and its significance for schools, three processes of “taming the school” can be highlighted, which the two educational philosophers analyse: “politicisation” (*ibid.*, p. 94f.), “pedagogisation” (*ibid.*, p. 97f.) and “popularisation” (*ibid.*, p. 108). They problematise the politicisation of schools as follows:

In this regard, we make a clear distinction between school and politics, between educational responsibility and political responsibility, between the renewal made possible by pedagogy and political reform. In one way or another, politics is about negotiation, persuasion or a struggle between different interest groups or social projects. The table at school is not a negotiating table; it is a table that makes study, exercise and training possible. It is a table upon which the teacher offers something up and in doing so allows and encourages the young generation to experience itself as a new generation. This, as Hannah Arendt points out, is why a political project that envisions a new world often looks to the school as its political tool of choice. What is problematic about this is not only that it entails the politicisation of the school – students are addressed as citizens who have something to learn – but also the scholasticisation of politics – citizens are addressed as students who must take up their civic duty. The first trend we can simply call indoctrination while the second could be called infantilisation. They find their expression in the figure of the doctrinal teacher as the interpellator of students and the condescendingly instructive minister who insists on teaching citizens a lesson. (*ibid.*, p. 94f.)

The concern that pupils are indoctrinated with the (political) convictions of the teacher within the school is the starting point of the discussion about the neutrality of teachers – as we could see above in the teacher's neutrality debate in North America.

Referring back to Arendt's separation of the pedagogical and political spheres, Masschelein and Simons point out that mixing the spheres enables both the political instrumentalization of schools and learners, as well as the infantilisation of mature adults in the political sphere. However, in response to concerns about the politicisation of schools, the authors of *Neutral Teachers* do not advocate a stronger separation of the pedagogical and political spheres, which would also emphasise the pedagogical responsibility of teachers. They strive for a combination of pedagogisation and popularisation of the school: Teachers should be more orientated towards the needs of pupils and at the same time particularly value the opinions resulting from their lifeworld. In both processes, the teacher is seen above all as a caring counsellor who designs his/her lessons to be completely child-oriented. However, Masschelein and Simons warn: "popularisation keeps students infantile" (p. 108). If students' opinions are not challenged by the teacher, they cannot leave their lifeworld. For the authors of *Neutral Teachers*, school should not be "a place of conformity", but the consequences they draw from this – which include the untouchability of pupils' opinions – mean that school is negated as a place for sharing knowledge and as a "place for maturing, advancing, finding a way in the world, and rising above oneself" (Masschelein & Simons, 2013, p. 108).

The concept of judgement demonstrates a strong alternative for teacher education that emphasizes the scientific and pedagogical responsibility of the teacher in the school. In addition to that it offers an important alternative to the concept of neutrality: the general standpoint. The general standpoint is marked by an interest and involvement in other people's perspectives instead of a neutral attitude. The Arendtian concept of judgement puts an emphasis on the *sensus communis*, the common sense, that relates people with each other and enables them to imagine and take over a plurality of viewpoints. This is one of the reasons why the concept of judgement is helpful for an affirmative understanding of teacher education (cf. Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019).

The other reason is its concentration on the thing that stands in the centre of judgement. In the German teacher education tradition, there exists the image of the didactical triangle with the three corners: teacher, students, and the thing (cf. Prange, 1983, p. 35-48). The intention of that visualization was to emphasize that all three corners are supposed to be considered in every lesson planning. However, the triangle can also be used to indicate misbalances and to name pedagogical orientations that focus only on one of the corners: student-centred/child-centred education, teacher-centred or thing-centred education. But while teacher- or student-centred education focuses on either the instructional ideas of the teacher or the needs of the students, thing-centred education usually underlines the connection between all three corners. In thing-centred education the relation between teacher and students is built through the shared interest in the thing as Masschelein and Simons (2013) underline:

A community of students is a unique community; it is a community of people who have nothing (yet) in common, but by confronting what is brought to the table [by the teacher],

its members can experience what it means to share something and activate their ability to renew the world (p. 73).

Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019) emphasize this understanding with reference to Arendt even further:

we suggest that Arendt's renowned criticism of student-centeredness does not necessarily entail a return to teacher-centeredness. Instead, we argue, it involves a thing-centred pedagogy. Briefly put, this means that it is the concrete thing one studies in the classroom, i.e. the subject matter, which has authority over both student and teacher, and which defines both as student and teacher (p. 11f).

The thing initiates the process of judgement, whether it is an example for a discussion topic or a certain behaviour. The thing, which is then considered as the particular case, needs to be mediated with the general, which is either the subject knowledge or the collective agreement on certain rules. The teacher concerns herself/himself with the thing or the child and is not neutral towards it. S/he has chosen the thing as an example because s/he cares for it and believes that it is important. The thing to the teacher is so important that s/he wants to pass it on to the next generation. The same is true when she corrects a student in their behaviour. S/he considers the student to be an important part of humanity and therefore tries to mediate between the student and the general collective of humans.<sup>13</sup> The teacher's scientific and pedagogical responsibilities underline why teachers cannot and should not be neutral. The problem that I have tried to highlight with the debate on *Neutral Teachers* is that one of the most important part (or one corner of the triangle) of teaching is lacking in this debate: the thing, the content, the subject matter. In the North American debate, the question of what are "controversial issues" usually started the discussion around teacher's neutrality. However, there has also been a shift in that debate which now highlights "the duty of impartiality as a professional expectation" (Maxwell, 2023, p. 608). Even though the intention of using more (neutral) diagnostics was to reduce discriminating assessments from the school, the diagnostic perspective has enforced a mistrust in teachers and their judgements that opens up an easy way to discredit them like in the example of *Neutral Teachers*. Moreover, the diagnostic view concentrates on the individual in comparison to and competition with others. Diagnostics draw strong lines between students that separate and distance them. Thus, the diagnostic perspective impedes the enlarged mentality that aims at including plural perspectives.

Replacing diagnostical approaches with the concept of judgement might be one way out of this development that underlines the teacher's responsibility for their subject,

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<sup>13</sup> The explanation of this perspective in English seems a bit harder than in German, where the term "Gattung" (= species) is not limited to the biological sense, but it can refer to the idea of a kind in a general sense. The idea of "Gattung Mensch" is important for theory of Bildung because it underlines that processes of Bildung always need a collective and historical perspective and cannot concentrate on the isolated individual (cf. Casale, 2022, p. 95f).

as well as their students and the teacher's intermediary position between them. However, the concept of judgement does not offer any standardized nor easy solutions but a way to embrace and take seriously the ambivalences of the teacher's profession.

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