

Philosophy of Education in a Critical Position

La filosofía de la educación en una posición crítica

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Philosophy of education has, in many countries, and especially in America, assured place in, but at the same time is limited to, academic life: it constitutes a mandatory or optional subject matter in teacher training programs, in graduate programs, pedagogical institutes, or university departments of “education”.

In these programs, philosophy of education is concerned with fixed and traditional objects: educational ends, activity related to the development of the child, curriculum conception, ethics, citizenship education, etc. A certain space is naturally devoted to the history of pedagogical ideas, from Antiquity to Dewey’s democratic education, including the Humanism of the Enlightenment or Rousseau’s negative education.

Even more than other specialties (metaphysics, logic, political philosophy), philosophy of education exists as a *normal* discipline, in the sense of what Thomas Kuhn has called a “normal science” in his seminal work (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962).

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The adjective first means that in the realm of this discipline, we work at responding to institutional demands, which maintain research and teachers' sayings in rather defined frames (in this respect, even vague discourses and slogans can remain "normal"). But "normal discipline" also means that striking novelty is rare, inexistent or in part artificial, and that in regards to other research or intellectual streams, this discipline is in a situation of heterogeneity. In what gets published as philosophy of education, references to large theories produced outside the field (often those feeding the public debate of the moment) are, as a matter of fact, a standard feature and can descend into a *name-dropping* competition. In France for example, where philosophy of education only has a very modest presence as an academic field, it very hard to quote recent contributions Marcel Gauchet, who participates of a much wider reflection on the present of the democratic demand.

There are two types of reasons for this situation.

On the one hand, the massification of educational systems have brought schooling as well as broader educational problems, to a degree of complexity never encountered before. Montaigne designated the "institution of kids" as "the most difficult of the humane sciences": the progress of science only added to this difficulty.

On the other hand, this massification was accompanied, almost everywhere, by a depreciation of the work of teachers: in the academic field, reflections in education did not gain more prestige. Although we know better than ever to what extent the destiny of societies is linked to the performances and characteristics of their educational systems, it is as if the conditions of schooling or more generally of education, were considered by the best minds as either despairing subjects, or as not worth any of their efforts.

The problem is thus: which questions should philosophy of education concentrate on in order to demonstrate its aptitude to answer to contemporary demands, and doing so, to conquer the part of well needed recognition so enormously lacking nowadays?

What is criticized in many parts of the world is a so-called loss of efficiency or effectiveness in teaching. Its causes can be multiple: poor school structures, weight of family and social suffering, bad curriculum organization, insufficient attention to learning difficulties, shortage of qualified teachers, but also students' scepticism towards studies, distrustful attitude towards the institution and adults in general, power of group logics, impact of new technologies on students' attention, feeling of the obsolescence of "classic" school values, etc.

These diverse aspects of what must be named, with prudence, a historical crisis of the form of schooling are too often studied in a segmented way. It would be more appropriate not to try to unite them in a totalizing analysis, but to address each one with the concern of highlighting their relation to the others. But lacking in the usual approaches to these phenomena is also a certain form of boldness in the conception and discussion of new rules, adjusted to the present reality.

We must say "in the *discussion* of new rules", and not only in their conception, because the philosophical dimension of a process relies on the methodical character of a discussion. But imagination is here necessary, and we suggest that it can and must be articulated to a confrontation of the present with the past – a past that is not simply one of the schooling institutions, but one of the great texts on education.

One could, for example, read the pedagogical writings of Erasmus, the treatise, *Liberal Education of Children* (1529) or the *De ratione studii* [Study plan] (1512). These texts present an intensive literary educational model where the preceptor teaches in a soft and playful atmosphere. This private education, influenced by the idea that “almost all that seems worthy of being known” has been written in ancient languages, is very far from us. However, besides the legitimate promotion of softness and play, the idea of a preparation to the knowledge of things through the knowledge of words is not one that can be swept away either.

From the classical age, the drifts and limits of a pedagogy founded on books have been systematically brought to the fore: this does not mean that the ideal of the humanist culture has been, as it were, integrally “deconstructed”. Instead of borrowing a purely adaptative model of education from contemporary psychology, philosophy of education must meditate on the destiny of more ancient models and in doing so, determine what actuality and validity they have kept. This does not refer only to the relation that contemporary education, despite its particular aims, keeps with certain forms of tradition: it refers to the relation that philosophical reflection must keep with the most solid and refined intellectual constructions produced in the field. Although the gap between classical models and actual conditions of contemporary pedagogical activity may have widened to an abyss, there still remain from these models sufficient substance and authority to guide the pedagogical thought, i.e. precisely to make it determine, in a new environment, what can be preserved and diffused from an ancient impulse.

To care for an impulse that will be renewed only through its own remembrance, is what we call today “giving meaning back” to practices in danger of losing their own. Which program could stand out more and concentrate in itself more on all of the dimensions of philosophy? As for the many problems such a gesture will encounter, it is only once the necessity of this gesture has been recognized that the many problems it will create can be distinguished.

