

Philosophy of Education and its Role in Current Times

La filosofía de la educación y su papel en la actualidad

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Recibido: 29/11/2010

Aprobado: 30/11/2010

Some areas in the field of education are defined by the *topics* they refer to: for example, didactics of mathematics, theories of learning, and new technologies in education among many others. The philosophy of education can be better understood as an *approach* to the study of education; as a particular way of tackling it. Thus, nothing prevents it from dealing with the didactics of mathematics, theories of learning, or new technologies in education.

Now, what is this characteristic approach of philosophy of education? It is difficult to obtain a clear and uncontroversial account, but some things can be said about it in order to distinguish it from other approaches. Here I will mention two that I consider important nowadays. The first one is that it usually uses systematic reflection rather than direct empirical contact with its object of study. This does not mean that it never uses empirical observations to help with the formulation of an argument. However, unlike a scientific approach to education, these empirical observations are usually used as illustrations instead of being evidence or ultimate criteria for judging a conclusion.

Another characteristic of philosophy of education is that it allows itself to study questions about meaning, sense, importance, significance, relevance, purpose, the ought-to-be, and so on, about topics, concepts, issues and programs in education. For example: What is critical thinking? What vision of democracy should we adopt in civic education

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programs? What should be the role of parents within the educational community? What is an educated person? Let us notice that we do not yet know how empirical observations could help us answer these questions, and this is one reason why educational sciences have ignored them. But then there is a crucial problem here: the fact that questions about meaning and what ought to be are difficult to study does not mean it is not important to address them, especially in an applied field. Therefore, philosophy of education finds here an irreplaceable role, which is one of critic, of consciousness, destabilizing, but also of openness to new possibilities and new understandings.

Today it seems to me there is an attempt, although not necessarily widespread, of pragmatizing philosophy of education: of bringing it closer to educational issues that are in vogue, as well as to decision makers in this domain. This trend could be a reaction to the loss of influence that philosophy of education has been suffering for decades, being displaced by scientific approaches, particularly the quantitative one of an experimental or quasi-experimental nature. In my opinion, it is necessary that the philosophy of education address issues that are important for policymakers and practitioners. However, it must also not lose sight of its role, albeit an uncomfortable one, which consists in questioning the purposes we set for education and the ways we understand its issues.