

The Philosophy of Education, and the Education of Philosophy

La filosofía de la educación y la educación de la filosofía

Paul STANDISH¹

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It is not uncommon to find philosophers and others sometimes puzzled about what the philosophy of education is. But what exactly is the puzzle? Questions about teaching and learning are at the heart of philosophy, and this can be seen at least as far back as Plato. In epistemology and ethics, for example, the concern is not only with the nature of knowledge or the good, but with how we come to know, how we enter into the good life. So too, any approach to more metaphysical questions, any phenomenology, must understand the human being as dynamically related to the environment, in ways that cannot be characterised adequately in causal terms but that must have recourse to the development of meaning and culture: human beings are not born conferring meaning on the world; they require initiation into a culture, which in turn depends upon what they creatively add; this is no less than the way the world is.

The philosophy of education is not then a branch of philosophy, on a par, say, with the philosophy of science or of law. The fairly clearly circumscribed reach of these branches, and to some extent their methods and approaches, are distinct from those of other branches. In the philosophy of education, by contrast, there is no branch of philosophy that is not relevant in some way: philosophy of science has a bearing, at the very least, on the teaching and substance of science within the curriculum; philosophy

¹ University of London, United Kingdom. Institute of Education.

of law pertains to legal issues surrounding, say, compulsory schooling or the independence of universities, as well as to the notions of citizenship into which young people are to be inducted.

Nor is the philosophy of education well understood as philosophy “applied”. There is a problem generally with the idea of applied philosophy, apt as this is to reinforce instrumental reason: so understood, philosophy is a more or less self-contained regime of thought but one that can be put to work as a technical means of solving problems. The professionalization of philosophy has fostered the first assumption; the rise of technology has naturalised the second. But this flies in the face of Aristotelian practical reason, the sense of wisdom in action, and it quite misses that powerful current in our inheritance of what has been called “philosophy as a way of life”. Now this is pertinent to education for three reasons. If the practical questions facing the teacher or policy-maker are pursued far enough, they involve a professional challenge whose philosophical force is scarcely registered in purely scholarly enquiry. If the experience of the classroom is adequately acknowledged, this will reveal an existential exposure that teacher education all too often denies. And to the extent that a developing and questioning sense of what the good life amounts to must characterise a liberal education (at least), this invites this broader pursuit of philosophy into the curriculum itself.

The establishment of the philosophy of education within the academy has made a powerful contribution to thinking about policy, practice, and institutions, especially as these have become powerful organs of the state, and it has served as a vital countervailing force to the empiricism of the age. Yet the disciplinary map can seem somewhat different outside the Anglophone world. In German traditions, enquiry into education necessarily involves thinking of a philosophical kind, where philosophy is understood as less clearly separated from other disciplines in the humanities, and where the *Geisteswissenschaften* offer something culturally richer, more hermeneutic, and less anxiously constrained methodologically than what tends to pass under the name of “social science”.

Hence, it is a disciplinarily porous, existentially engaged, methodologically non-anxious commitment to philosophy that can best inform education. Enquiry such as this enhances philosophy itself.