

Philosophy of Education as Public Servant

La filosofía de la educación como servicio público

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Philosophy of education explores philosophical issues arising in education. There is no shortage of these. Educational goals are a good starting place. What should parents, teachers and others involved in upbringing and formal education be aiming at? Developing moral sensibility? A broad understanding of the major fields of knowledge? Preparation for citizenship? Helping the learner towards a fulfilling life? Induction into the world of work? What priorities should there be among such aims?

Sorting out the issues these questions raise takes one into familiar territory in general philosophy: into, for instance, rival views about the nature of morality, knowledge and understanding, democracy, personal well-being. But the special expertise of the philosopher of education is in applying these ideas sensitively to education. This presupposes a good understanding of background realities, whether of classroom life, child-rearing, administrative and political arrangements, or relevant sociological and historical phenomena.

Similar points apply to other topics than aims. These include ways of realising aims – methods of upbringing and teaching, aspects of the curriculum, whole school processes, assessment, teacher education, school leadership; the distribution of educational goods and issues of equality; the nature of the learner, including his or her intelligence, emotional life, motivation, imagination, concept-acquisition, thinking skills. Political

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philosophy, the philosophy of mind, and epistemology are, with ethics, the major areas of general philosophy to which philosophy of education returns again and again. Aesthetics, philosophy of religion and other 'philosophies of' come into their own especially, but not only, when applied to work in specific curriculum areas.

For the last fifty years, the chief role of philosophy of education has been as handmaiden to public education systems, as well as family education, bringing clarity and wisdom to the issues that abound in them. In the earlier part of this period, its main clients were school teachers, student teachers, and policy makers. While policy critique remains buoyant, work with the first two of these groups has become less salient in Britain and other countries, owing to policy moves to focus teachers' attention more on immediate tasks and less on reflection about wider issues.

Perhaps partly for this reason, some of those working in the field have turned to other tasks. These have often been of a scholarly and more inward-looking nature, often concentrating on the ideas of particular philosophers, not least from the continent of Europe, and making thinner connexions than used to be made with the on-going world of education.

The last two decades have also seen work in the field expanding beyond its former heartlands in North America, Britain, Australasia and South Africa to cover, now, the whole globe, not least countries in South and East Asia like China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, as well as continental Europe.

While this has exacerbated the trend towards inwardness, and turned philosophy of education further away from its older, 'handmaiden', role in local education systems, the new international links have also helped educational reformers and policy critics within the discipline to share ideas they can apply to their own national contexts.