

Philosophy of Education: contemporary critical issues

Alexandre Anselmo Guilherme

e-mail: alexandre.guilherme@pucrs.br

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul. Brasil

Abstract: Where does philosophy of education take us? In the social, political and cultural turmoil of the present age, it can be argued that our social imagination might be confined, and our political subverted. In response to this, some philosophers of education have strived to reveal many ideologies at work in modern myths such as the orders of educational progression, of equality of opportunity, and of the power of measurement. But is there something beyond what Paul Ricoeur called the «desert of criticism» (Ricoeur. *The Symbolism of Evil*)? How helpful and effective have these criticisms of our modern age been? In this editorial, an introduction to the special issue of *Philosophy of Education: Contemporary Critical Issues*, I discuss the importance of a critical attitude in education, and philosophy of education, whilst making reference to the works of Ilan Gur-Ze'ev and David Carr.

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur; Ilan Gur-Ze'ev; Critical Pedagogy; Philosophy of Education; David Carr.

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I am very pleased to have been invited to be the guest editor for this special issue of *Philosophy of Education* by the editors of *Foro de Educación*. Such invitations are important because they provide us with opportunities to learn about theoretical and practical perspectives being developed in different contexts, and to establish connections that might prove to be of great value in the development of future projects and research outputs. Thus, I thank the editors for this invitation and look forward to collaborating further in the future.

I believe an appropriate starting point is to refer to the call for papers to this special issue entitled *Philosophy of Education: Contemporary Critical Issues*. There, I stated:

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philosophers of education have strived to reveal many ideologies at work in modern myths such as the orders of educational progression, of equality of opportunity, and of the power of measurement. But is there something beyond what Paul Ricoeur called the «desert of criticism» (Ricoeur. *The Symbolism of Evil*)? How helpful and effective have these criticisms of our modern age been?

In this quote, I referred to one of Paul Ricoeur's most famous passages, and it is perhaps interesting to cite another one that complements it – I believe that both are deeply connected to issues faced by us in our times. Ricoeur (1967, p. 350) says: «We are children of criticism, and we seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative». That is to say, it is only through maintaining a *critical attitude* that we can understand and further develop the current issues of our times, and this is certainly true in the field of education.

This has been a continuous concern for the field of Critical Pedagogy, which aims to foster and encourage an education that is critical at its heart. However, the same Critical Pedagogy has been criticised for losing its *critical attitude* and becoming more *dogmatic*, which accounts for its loss of academic and practical relevance. For instance, one such author that has noted this situation is Gur-Ze'ev (2003), who emphasises that Critical Pedagogy lost its ability for self-criticism, and therefore of reforming and renewing itself; as a consequence of this, academics and policy makers have stopped paying attention to it. If we are more specific to certain Critical Pedagogists, this has also been noted by Brayner (2015) with regards to Freire within the Brazilian context, where Freire is idealised and his theories taken as absolute truths in many quarters of Brazilian academia. This is a bizarre situation given that, arguably, one of the cornerstones of Freire's philosophy is attaining the *capacity to critique* one's own situation and society as a whole. It is my understanding that other examples in different contexts can easily be found. This presents us with a very peculiar situation, which can only be remediated by holding steadily to a *critical attitude* if the field of Critical Pedagogy is to regain its importance and relevance in academia and society.

The above reminded me of a lecture given by David Carr in 2000 at the *Diversidade e Identidade: 1ª Conferência Internacional de Filosofia da Educação* (Diversity and Identity: 1st International Conference on Philosophy of Education), at the Universidade do Porto, Portugal, entitled «Contribution to Symposium on Philosophy of Education» which is centred around the contributions that Analytic Philosophy can make to education, and philosophy of education. In this lecture he comments that «insofar as it is proper to regard philosophy in general and educational philosophy in particular as a source of analytical skills apt for the critical examination of this or that received form of human discourse, the critical analysis of educational theory and policy documentation would appear to be a key role of educational philosophers – and it is certainly regarded as such by the founding father of post-war British analytical educational philosophy, R.S. Peters» (Carr, 2000, p. 185). Carr continues commenting that R.S. Peters was very critical of the kind of philosophy of education that was prevalent in Teacher Education at the time, which approached the study of the great educational doctrines in an uncritical, and therefore dogmatic

way. That is, according to R.S. Peters, what is important in Teacher Education is not the mere acquisition of knowledge; rather, the most important thing is to attain a set of critical skills that is grounded, following analytical philosophy, on conceptual and logic analysis.

To demonstrate the importance of critical skills, Carr refers to an example used by Peters, that remains pertinent today. It is common to hear educationists, teachers, and academics, stating that in education we must aim at «the development of the whole child». However, Peters understands this to be a vacuous statement (e.g. What does «whole child» means? What kind of ‘development’?) and that we must be more precise with the language we use in education, and that we must unravel possible conceptual issues (Carr 2000, p. 185). This means that «it should be clear... that analytical philosophers are strongly committed to the idea of a proper division of intellectual labour in the interests of some kind of strategic and systematic advance in our understanding of important theoretical and practical issues» Carr, 2000, p. 188).

If we reflect back on Gur-Ze’ev’s criticism of Critical Pedagogy (as well as Brayner’s assessment of Freire and Freirean ideas within the Brazilian context), it can be argued that *critical attitudes* have been lost along the way. This seems to demonstrate that R.S. Peters focus on the attainment of critical skills that are grounded on conceptual and logical analysis are primordial for teachers, who should in turn encourage these skills in their students. Compare this to Gur-Ze’ev’s *improvisor teacher* who is always *critical and encourages critique*, and who does not intend to impose his views on anyone; rather, he encourages discussion and tries to understand the others’ point of view. Gur-Ze’ev (2010, p. 43) says that the *improviser* and counter-education displays an:

[...] openness and uncontrolled...creativity that is responsible and generous towards the Other and reaches out to the unknown and to self-overcoming as self-constitution; *without an egoistic-oriented ‘I’ initiating the colonization of the Other, the response to the otherness or the self-sacrifice of the victimizing kind.* The otherness of the other, the insecurity, the non-consensual and refusal of the self-evidence and other manifestations of the invitation to the «home-returning» project [...] [our emphasis].

Thus, this special issue aims to help further develop Philosophy of Education drawing attention to research currently being developed by scholars in the field – research that access *critically* some issues that are being faced by us. It also joins scholars from Europe, Israel, North and South America. The opening article, «Education and the Love for the World: articulating a post-critical educational philosophy» by Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, Piotr Zamojski, is centred around the philosophies of two continental philosophers, Arendt and Rancière. It discusses education not as a form of political action, working in the name of emancipation, which is something conceived by critical pedagogy theorists, such as Freire; instead of this and following Rancière, the article assumes an equality of intelligences as a starting point from which the world can be set free for the new generation, which is also something central in Arendt’s philosophy of education. The second article

«Tradition, Authority and Dialogue: Arendt and Alexander on Education», by Itay Snir continues with an Arendtian theme. Snir discusses two attempts to challenge mainstream liberal education, one by Hannah Arendt and the other by contemporary Israeli philosopher Hanan Alexander. He notes that Arendt and Alexander both identify problems in liberal-secular modern politics and present alternatives based on reconnecting politics and education to tradition.

The following contribution, «Counter-Education and Cyberculture: A Possible Dialogue in the Light of Global Citizenship», by myself, Lucia Maria Martins Giraffa, and Cristina Martins, refer to the works of Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, another prominent Israeli philosopher of education. It discusses educational policies of international organizations, especially those concerning global citizenship, their implications for cyberculture/cyberspace as well as the possibility of implementing a counter-education project, as envisaged by Gur Ze'ev. The fourth article, «Religions and Religiosity: The Challenge to Know and to Recognize the Other», by Sonia Kramer and Joseph Edelheit, is inspired by the philosophies of Martin Buber and Abraham Heschel. Kramer and Edelheit note that discourses that value religious plurality coexist in various contexts with actions of humiliation, exclusion, violence and attempts to eliminate religious groups. To deal with this issue they refer to Buber, and his conception of religion and spirituality, and that the recognition of the other and his otherness is a responsible engagement, and to Heschel, and his vision of man, his passion for truth and the human search for God. They conclude by enquiring the implications for education and for encouraging genuine inter-religious dialogue. The fifth contribution, «Education, humanity and animality: reflections for a Derridean philosophy of education», by Ana Sorin, explores the impact that Emmanuel Lévinas's and Jacques Derrida's thought has had on the philosophy of education, especially in Spain and Latin America, and particularly in the works of Joan-Carles Mèlich and Fernando Bárcena, two important Spanish philosophers of education.

The last two articles are experimental in philosophy of education. In «The Education of Consciousness: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*», Emile Bojesen pushes the margins of philosophy of education by exploring Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and its characters. Bojesen's is a critique of limited and institutionally biased conceptions of experience as a form of education, and of philosophy of education. The last article, «Childhood and education: between medicalization and processes of subjunctivisation in school», by César Donizetti Pereira Leite and Rafael Christofolletti discusses the problems of medicalization in education which has become more acute in recent years. The focus of their critique is on the impact of views that aim at the homogenization of learning and of child behaviour in education.

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