

Interpretive developments of the philosophy of education in the anglophone tradition: an attempt to systematise them

Desarrollos interpretativos de la filosofía de la educación en la tradición anglófona: un intento de sistematización

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Abstract:

The introduction of the analytical method to the field of the philosophy of education led to a first golden age, which, as the method closed in on itself and isolated itself from educational reality, resulted in an epistemological and institutional crisis. In view of that crisis, the generations following that first period began a lively debate on how to move forward. This article, with the aim of considering the positions proposed, derives from this latter scenario. Its method is characterized by two basic elements. The first is a systematic review of all articles on philosophy of education by the main authors in the discipline. The second is a hermeneutic exercise that attempts to compose a unitary discourse

combining the main sensitivities of all of them. This results in the identification of five notable groups that differ mainly in the relationship that philosophy of education must maintain with educational practice and, consequently, in how the philosopher's exercise of education should be considered. This leads into a discussion about whether it is possible to consider all of these positions as integral parts of a whole that seeks to understand the phenomenon of education and improve it overall instead of regarding them as parts in themselves. If there is one reasonably clear conclusion, it is that it seems unlikely that a unifying perspective like the analytical one will reappear and that a dynamic of reciprocal dialogical relations is necessary as a new emerging paradigm.

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Resumen:

La introducción del método analítico en el ámbito de la filosofía de la educación dio lugar a una primera época dorada que, una vez el propio método se encerró en sí mismo y se aisló de la realidad educativa, originó una crisis epistemológica e institucional. Las generaciones posteriores a esa primera de Israel Scheffler y R. S. Peters, a la vista de esa crisis, comenzaron un amplio y rico debate sobre cómo conducirse en adelante. En ese último escenario nace este artículo, cuyo objetivo es realizar una aproximación a las principales posturas a la hora de comprender el área. El método que se ha seguido está caracterizado por dos notas esenciales. La primera, una revisión sistemática de todos los artículos sobre filosofía de la educación de los principales autores. La segunda, un ejercicio hermenéutico que inten-

tará componer un discurso unitario con las principales sensibilidades de todos ellos. El resultado es la identificación de cinco grupos reseñables que difieren entre sí, principalmente, en la relación que ha de mantener la filosofía de la educación con la práctica educativa y, en consecuencia, cómo ha de pensarse el propio ejercicio del filósofo de la educación. Lo que da lugar a discusión sobre si no es posible pensar todas esas posturas, más que vistas en sí mismas parcialmente, como partes integrantes de un todo que busca comprender el fenómeno educativo y lo mejora globalmente. Pues, si hay una conclusión más o menos evidente, es que no parece que vaya a existir de nuevo una perspectiva unificadora como la analítica y que es necesario una dinámica de relaciones dialógicas recíprocas como nuevo paradigma emergente.

Descriptor: filosofía, epistemología, investigación científica, filosofía de la educación, teorías educativas, historia de la educación anglófona, práctica educativa.

1. Introduction

It could be said that the philosophy of education¹ started to acquire its own identity in the anglophone settings of Britain and North America in the 1950s (Curren, Robertson, & Hager, 2003; Curren, 2017). First with Israel Scheffler, who delivered an important paper at The American Association for the Advancement of Science—later published in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Scheffler,

1954)—in which he stated that «rigorous logical analysis of key concepts related to the practice of education» was necessary (Scheffler, 1954, p. 9). And later on, with the encounter between Scheffler and Richard S. Peters at the Aristotelian Society in London, which directed the latter's efforts towards PE (Scheffler, 2008; Curren, Robertson, & Hager, 2003). In effect, the collaboration between the two of them at Harvard University² and the

subsequent return of Peters to the Institute of Education led to the spread of the analytic methodology across North America and through the United Kingdom and some other parts of Europe. In short, they not only played a key role in the birth of PE, but also its *belle époque*, widely disseminated in the *British Journal of Education* (Richardson, 2002), the *Journal of Philosophy of Education, Educational Theory, Studies in Philosophy of Education* (Curren, Robertson, & Hager, 2003), *Harvard Educational Review* (Evers, 1993) and the *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (Curren, Robertson, & Hager, 2003).

However, by the end of the 1970s, the analytical method had «completely collapsed» (Curren, 1999, xi). This was partly because of the direction it had taken, which led it into excessively technical questions, isolating the discipline from the broader fields of philosophy (Edel, 1972) and educational practice (Curren, 2017), but it was also partly because later generations of educational philosophers came from backgrounds with more diverse training and interests, which, along with this period of decadence, led them to new and fruitful interpretations (Curren, Robertson, & Hager, 2003; Chambliss, 2009; Curren, 2016). This does not mean that the analytical method has been completely extinguished (Curren, Robertson, & Hager, 2003). Instead, what happened was that PE had to reinvent itself. Accordingly, the discipline was enriched with new epistemological interpretations and new methodological proposals. The aim of this article

is to provide an approach to the most important developments in PE. With a few exceptions, these have occurred in the anglophone setting. This approach is not limited to the field of epistemology, where the relationships with other disciplines and with educational practice are located, but, in line with the interests of the authors studied here, it is also open to considerations about methodology, the identity of the philosopher of education, and the continued existence of PE in institutions.

2. First development. The philosophy of education as pure philosophy

The title of one of Harvey Siegel's last texts, *The Philosophy of Education and the Tyranny of Practice* (2017), perfectly illustrates the thesis he upheld throughout his career: that PE should be an exercise in pure philosophy. The core of his position can be understood from an epistemological dimension, which Siegel approaches by tracing a parallel with other similar disciplines, or from an institutional dimension, in which he considers the role PE plays as a body of academics with its own interests. We shall consider these below.

Indeed, Siegel observes a clear parallel between PE and the philosophy of science (cf. 1981b, p. 127; 1983). If «philosophers of science, for instance, in general do not attempt to effect practice (though of course in the long historical run they *do* effect scientific practice)» (1981b, p. 127), then, PE should understand that «it is the *phil-*

osophical understanding of science that philosophers of science seek; and such understanding is regarded as worthy enough to justify the effort» (1981b, p. 127). This observation of Siegel's has two potentially tautological consequences. That PE should not allow itself to be moved by the educational community's pressure for it to be practical (1981a) and that turning it into a practical theory, as though both dimensions were one single thing, is not a solution for revitalising the discipline (1981b). This does not mean that efforts to understand education philosophically do not bring with them improvements and developments in educational practice and it does not even mean that this is something that is not desirable (1981a). This, which is the second consequence, means that the exercise of philosophy of education «must establish and maintain a link with “pure” philosophy» (1981a, p. 15). In summary, the

philosophy of education is, first and foremost, a scholarly endeavor; like philosophy of law, philosophy of science, and other areas of «practical» philosophy, philosophy of education must aim and understand the philosophical dimensions of education — not at improving education, or convincing educators that philosophy might be of value to them—. Of course, if our work results in the improvement of practice, that would be grand. But that cannot be our direct aim (1981a, p. 15).

Consequently, from this argument, it can be deduced that, if it is to gain academic relevance from an institutional perspective, PE must simply concern itself with doing «good philosophical work,

of course» (1981a, p. 15). Siegel believes that the criteria of productivity cannot be applied to this way of understanding PE because to be «expected to be productive is to misunderstand the nature of philosophy of education» (1981b, p. 128). He states that there are tendencies that seek profitability from their research, in what he calls a «survival response», but he believes that, instead of allowing PE to survive or re-evaluate itself by directly contributing to practical improvements in educational practice, what will happen is that it will be subjected to the vagaries of the labour market «becoming anything, no matter how far it strays from its purpose» (1981b, p. 129), which is eminently intellectual.

The integrity of PE then would entail remaining faithful to its most philosophical roots (1981b, pp. 130-131, pp. 133-134). To put it another way, PE «has as its aim the illumination of the philosophical dimensions of education» (1983, p. 36).

3. Second development. Randall Curren and the middle ground

Randall Curren, from as far back as the definition he gave in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, kept a distance from Siegel's perspective. There he writes that PE «seeks understanding of educational matters and to provide practical guidance for educational practice and policy» (2015, p. 1). Nonetheless, and despite the clarity of his proposal, Curren is sufficiently even-handed to understand that the application of a

set of philosophical deductions, as Chambliss established in his work, «might be a sufficient condition for work to be philosophical, but it would not be a necessary condition» (Chambliss, 2009, p. 234). Consequently, educational philosophers who work in the field of Siegelian comprehension are also philosophers of education in their own right.

Having made this proviso, as he said, Curren believes that the crisis in analytical methodology opened the field up to a renaissance, driven by two elements (Curren, 1999; Curren, Robertson, & Hager, 2003). The first is the revival of the history of philosophy, making many thinkers from the past «interesting for us again» (Curren, 2007) and so interest in understanding the philosophical-educational implications of their work was awoken (Curren, 2010, p. 544, pp. 553-556). The second element relates to the increase in university studies and the subsequent demand for teaching of applied or professional ethics, which has resulted in PE taking an interest in its relationship with the adult world, as this world has ever longer contact with education (Curren, 2007; 2015), and it has opened itself to a deontological reflection on education itself and the tasks involved in it (Curren, 2007; Curren, 2005). But despite Curren's misgivings about predicting the future of PE (Curren, 2007), he ultimately believes this could involve two questions: the first is to «work on relatively unexplored but increasingly peripheral problems» (Curren, 2017, p. 3) and the second is to «search outside the fields established parameters for new sources of intellectu-

al “energy” or new research paradigms» (Curren, 2017, p. 3). Regarding this second point, I feel a digression is required to understand what it is that Curren refers to specifically.

Because Curren does not only mark these future paths in the work he is developing in his own words. After his first major text on Aristotle, his writings show at least three paths that his ideas follow. The first is in the new frameworks for comprehension where new ways of doing PE operate. This can be seen in the effort he made to think about eudaimonic theory from psychological perspectives, where he collaborated with professionals from this field (Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013). The second is the intuition that analytical methodology can continue to cast light on philosophical knowledge of education if it opens itself to new problems or comes into contact with other methodologies, as observed in *Living Well Now and in the Future*. Here, Curren opens with a chapter where he seeks a terminological approach to the concept of «sustainability» from a first ecological proposal which, however, is open to other perspectives (Curren & Metzger, 2017, pp. 1-7). The third path, seen in his third book, confirms what is suggested in the previous ones: collaboration with professionals from other areas outside education. In *Patriotic Education in a Global Age*, Curren collaborates with the historian Charles Dorn (Curren & Dorn, 2018) as he had previously done with various psychologists and the geologist Ellen Metzger. But what conclusions can we draw from his position?

In summary, that the future of PE would, in some way, involve a decentring movement. On the one hand, forgetting the analysis of the traditional concepts on which the first generation focussed, even insofar as these concepts are studied, to start studying more peripheral questions that they could not consider owing to the scale of the enterprise they had to face or because they did not notice them or simply were not present for certain problems. But there is also a methodological decentring: seeing how academics from other fields have thought about reality to discover its educational implications contemplated philosophically (Curren, 1999; Curren & Metzger, 2017).

4. Third development (and a coda). The philosophy of education between philosophy and education

Nicholas Burbules is, perhaps, the person who best represents the conviction that PE can deliberately improve educational practice without betraying its philosophical roots. And just as he rejects Siegel's position, since he believes that it is a limited interpretation that could again isolate PE (1989, p. 232; 2002, p. 349), he also rejects the contrasting position, which involves forgetting a philosophical interpretation of reality in pursuit of pedagogical efficiency (1989, p. 231). Burbules believes that to answer the question of what makes PE relevant at present, it is necessary to think philosophically in a world that has changed greatly since the years of Scheffler and Peters (1991; 2003). A world which is increasingly globalised, where

students live through new technologies (2002a), and which is postmodern with that doubt that denies that things can truly be known (1995; 2000; 2002b). To put it strictly in the terms of Burbules, PE must be contextualised in the reality it aspires to consider if it is to be truly effective (cf. 2000). Consequently, he proposes a Situated Philosophy of Education (Burbules & Abowitz, 2009): «the philosophical stance of the collaborator» (2002a, p. 354). Or, to put it another way, «the work of the philosopher who is *involved* on site» (2002a, p. 354): the philosopher thinking in the very setting where education happens. Positioned in this way, PE «can illuminate the significant educational dimensions underlying major philosophical problems» (Burbules, 2002a, p. 354). The first outcome of this change in paradigm would derive specifically from this fear of becoming an applied philosophy. In view of this, Burbules believes that it would approximate to the classical ideal of the *paideia*, which combines epistemological, moral, and critical thinking reflections (Burbules, 2002a, p. 356; Burbules, 2008, pp. 273-274). Its inherent critical potential would bring PE to the very heart of educational policies and the problems faced by schools, considering both philosophically. In this way, the philosopher of education would be thinking from specific situations, the richness of which would largely determine the richness of the educational philosophies developed (Burbules, 2002a, p. 356).

Claudia Ruitenber effectively positions herself in the same paradigm as Burbules, adding a refinement that delves deeper into the discussion about the philosopher

of education's critical distance from the reality she wishes to explore (Ruitenberg, 2014, p. 91). The difference is that what Burbules describes as «situated» is here «embedded». No longer just situated, but instead fully immersed in educational reality. This term was developed in the context of war reporting (2014, p. 91) and she uses it to refer to the philosophy of education. Clearly this closeness of the philosopher to the situation studied introduces the problem of the detachment of her arguments regarding the truth, since, just as reporters sometimes do, she might end up taking the side of one of the groups in the conflict. However, Ruitenberg maintains that the refinement she contributes to the model of Burbules lead to «a dispassionate and unbiased commitment to truth» (2014, p. 91) which, at times, brings her in line with Siegel's position. With the specific aim of avoiding falling into internal contradiction, Ruitenberg maintains that the philosopher must remain vigilant (Ruitenberg, 2014, pp. 92-93) and open to other disciplines that also seek to understand education (Ruitenberg, 2014, pp. 89-91). Having said this, and this is the second note that should be added, she states that it is important not to fall prey to an excess methodologism. It is true that this is important because having a defined method is helpful for competing in funding calls or for convincing private institutions to award grants and funds (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 315). But, being strictly romantic, Ruitenberg enriches the previous figure of the *embedded* philosopher and the war correspondent with the image of the artist. If she had to compare the figure of the philosopher of education with another parallel one, this would be

the person who regards nature and herself, who listens to what things say, imposes order on them, and writes about them (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 318).

I believe a brief digression is necessary here to allow for a way of conceiving of PE, which would otherwise have to be in a marginal section, as this position has sufficient content for it, but it is in some way related to this idea of the artist. For Paul Smeyers, in effect, philosophy is more poetry than logic. This, in broad terms, is his answer to the question of how a PE that aspires to be relevant and to give meaning to its author's task should be characterised (2006, p. 2). Smeyers proposes this idea aware that there is a new blossoming in interest in PE, similar to the one that occurred in the golden years, just in a new and alien university context (2010, p. 95-96). And this is not just because of the pressures the modern university puts on new researchers, but also because of the task of PE itself, which no longer faces the challenge of establishing a defined identity for itself, which is what motivated that first generation, but rather the task of improving education (Smeyers, 2010, pp. 93-94; Smeyers, 2011, pp. 292-293). These two circumstances mean that the method acquires a certain relevance, without this meaning it must succumb to «methodolatry» (Smeyers, 2011, p. 296). Smeyers believes that philosophical logic parcels the possibilities of understanding reality into structures of knowledge that *alla fine* are structures of language. Consequently, as language is so decisive, the key to accessing a new way of thinking about reality would be a new language, which creates a new reality (Smeyers, 2006, p.

3-7). Philosophy would then become an exercise in poetic composition where the real would emerge based on new connections that philosophers had been unable to make in previous centuries, bound as they were by the chains of logic. «Philosophy is “a poetic composition”» (2006, p. 8), according to Smeyers, «and the philosopher is described more as an itinerant sketcher, and not as a settled cartographer» (2006, p. 7). Therefore, and in regards to PE, the «philosopher can defy and provoke by offering another reading, another interpretation. However, she cannot impose a compelling argument for either educational practice or theory» (Smeyers, 2010, p. 104). Two consequences of this approach can be identified. Firstly, that it is no longer possible to talk about a single method for knowing educational reality (Smeyers, 2006, p. 12). Instead, methodological flexibility leads to there being as many methods as there are possible readings of educational reality that the philosopher can see (Smeyers, 2006, pp. 12-13), something that would make it more like a «field of “applied” philosophy» (Smeyers, 2006, p. 14). And secondly, that the exercise of PE is politically charged as it not only discerns new ways of educating but also new realities that can be accessed.

5. Fourth development. Philosophy as an auxiliary instrument for purely pedagogical thought

In many ways, Gert Biesta shares some elements with the previous perspective. He moves away from Siegel and Curren (Biesta, 2012b, p. 3), arguing that PE must develop in an epistemological

postmodernism (Biesta, 2012a, p. 518) — to which he adds some deconstructionist elements that open it up to a much more marked personalism than the previous positions (1999, pp. 481-483)— and, although he does not wish to focus on the methodological, his reflection is open to collaboration with other disciplines. This last point might be the best one for understanding it. Biesta, unlike the previous authors, does not feel like part of the anglophone tradition, but rather the German one (2015, pp. 4-7). This means that his interest in PE does not comprise the extent to which understanding of education must happen through philosophy (Biesta, 2012b, p. 3; Biesta, 2015, p. 9), as in any gradation of this position, educational responses are clearly philosophical and are hard to incarnate in the local (Biesta, 2011b). Rather, as in all of the German paradigm, he thinks «philosophy is one of the *resources* for conducting theoretical —and for that matter also empirical research— and scholarship in education» (Biesta, 2014, p. 10). This last option opens up a distinct procedural field in which it may perhaps be necessary to think again about elements of educational reality that were thought to be fully understood (Biesta, 2010; 2011a; 2014): what it is to educate, what a teacher, student, or school is, for example. In this paradigm, PE should believe that education is education and not learning (Biesta, 2012a, pp. 583-584), that the educational act is ambiguous and so reflection will always be weak (Biesta, 2012a, pp. 584-586), that it should not become a discourse on the essences surrounding the phenomenon, but instead on the concrete

existences of the people who participate in it (Biesta, 2012a, pp. 586-589), and that interest should focus on the soul and not just on the mind (Biesta, 2012a, pp. 589-590), on truth and not just on perspectives (Biesta, 2012a, pp. 590-591).

Jan Masschelein's thinking derives from a similar context and a similar spirit to the one permeating Biesta's thinking, although at some points Masschelein is also connected to currents in contemporary anglophone thought. Masschelein, in effect, puts the «I» at the centre of philosophical-educational reflection (2011a). PE would then be identified with a form of ascesis. In his own words, «it seeks to transform or modify one's mode of being and how one lives the present» (Masschelein, 2011a, p. 40). He follows Arendt for this process of centring the self, which is an «exercise of/in thought» (Masschelein, 2011a, p. 40) involving the start of PE. This is the reflection the philosopher makes on the process by which he constructs himself publicly, and which is interpreted here as a useful instrument not only for doing one's own discipline but also for guiding others (Masschelein, 2011a; 2011b). Like Biesta, Masschelein believes it is necessary to ask oneself repeatedly about the essential elements of education, given that the answers already given were directed at the essences of the terms they analysed, but not their existence and, more specifically, at the existence of the philosopher herself (Masschelein, 2011b, p. 40). The manner in which these questions are asked is like the one Biesta proposed. Not seeing philosophy as the framework for thought in which it is

necessary to move, but as another instrument in the effort to ask about education from education (cf. Masschelein, 2014, pp. 208-209; 2014, pp. 197-210).

6. Fifth development. The philosophy of education as pure praxis

Biesta and Masschelein's proposals, despite them showing a certain reluctance to think about education from exclusively philosophical premises, maintained a certain metaphysical position. Even though from existentialist and clearly pedagogical positions, they continued to see it as necessary to ask the classical questions about the elements of education. However, it would be difficult to say that the authors who followed continued with something similar, given that they either have excessively critical assumptions, making them see PE solely from institutionalist perspectives, or excessively practical ones, leading them to surmise that PE has no purpose if it does not have a practical application.

The person who has best described, in a critical context, the relationship PE maintains from an epistemological and institutional perspective is Peter Roberts. For Roberts, PE is «a way of life» both philosophically and economically. In other words, it is a philosophical way of being, where one's attention is always directed at the educational, but, it is also a basis for life (Roberts, 2014). Nonetheless, he experiences a reality check when observing himself and his colleagues in the Australian Philosophy of Education

Society, who do not find work in their field of study or find it in posts that have little or nothing to do with this discipline (2009). He sees that the emerging situation of the university guided by neoliberal policies (Roberts & Stewart, 2016, p. 239-243), and the situation of the discipline itself, institutionalised through conferences, journals, and manuals (2014), makes impossible a detached life dedicated to reflection on education. The consequences for PE are clear. Despite a revival of the discipline, PE has been pushed out of syllabuses (Roberts, 2014; Roberts, 2016, p. 246-247). Faced with this panorama, Roberts is convinced that the classical version of the philosopher will not return, but, if only to attract students, PE should become practical in an institutional sense; it should show that it is important for teachers and remain alive in teacher training programmes (2014).

This is not the case Morwenna Griffiths proposes in her educational philosophy. However, she does provide a hermeneutics of the principal educational philosophies and concludes that most of them contain a certain concern for how to influence political-educational decisions. If I did not write this when discussing the authors, this is because it was a peripheral aspect of their doctrines that could be deduced from the fact that they were distanced from Siegel's position. Or, from a different perspective, if I bring it up now, it is because the thinking of Griffiths insists on this point more tenaciously. Griffiths notes that there are various tensions within the field of PE that are still unresolved (2014, p. 6), among

which stands out the question of whether the discipline should be understood as a process, where this would be «the act of doing philosophy» (2014, p. 7), or a product, from which a particular perspective can be expected that gives meaning to reality and makes it possible to act on it (2014, pp. 7-8). In any case, Griffiths believes that it is necessary to carry out a form of PE related to the close settings in which the philosopher moves, a more local type of philosophy, which is not just born from a philosophical position in the world, but from «multiple conversations and dialogues» (2014, p. 8). Only in this way will PE be able to influence political decisions (Griffiths, 2014, pp. 14-16), «improving the education of children and students» (Griffiths, 1997, pp. 192-194), thanks to philosophers who are capable of dialogue with politicians (Griffiths, 2014, p. 16) and the agents involved in education (Griffiths, 1997, pp. 199-200).

7. Conclusions

Having completed this overview, and in view of the variations undergone by anglophone PE since the crisis in the analytic perspective, it appears that two ideas can be drawn from it. The first is that philosophers of education themselves experience the observed plurality more as a battle to elucidate the method that unifies the approaches to the phenomenon of education and the group of academics, as the analytical focus once did, rather than as a strength. The second, which derives from the first, is that it does seem likely that a focus will emerge that has the same force as the analytical method

of the 1970s. But, from this realisation in particular, two questions arise with which I intend to close this study, albeit not definitively.

The first question: are these variations definitely incompatible from an epistemological, methodological, and institutional perspective? As I have already suggested, it appears that it would be necessary for one of the perspectives to prevail in order to unify all of the efforts and gain epistemological and institutional presence in the academy. This can be seen perfectly in the two extremes of the variations analysed, despite the different intermediate gradations. Siegel, who rejects the practical application of its “purely” philosophical postulates, and Burbules, Smeyers, and Roberts, who see practical application as almost necessary for various reasons. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the key-stone for a richer understanding of PE lies in Curren’s intermediate view. That the practical application of PE is a sufficient but not necessary condition. Ultimately, and although it is not explicit in his work, it appears to be clear that there are dimensions of the reality of education that require an understanding that helps cast light on the phenomenon of education and from which an ulterior practical proposal does not necessarily have to be deduced. Or, to put it in more phenomenological terms, if the human being is a mystery and at the same time is educable, then PE cannot deduce practical conclusions for all of the dimensions that make up the human being and can be interpreted from a pedagogical perspective. Consequently, all of the paths for approaching the phe-

nomenon of education are necessary in view of the acquisition of a more in-depth knowledge of this phenomenon, which, albeit not partially, does have an overall impact on an improvement in the educational process. But, however it may be, the variety of methodologies comprise a set of instruments in the service of a group of academics. In this way, it makes sense to speak about a body of academics on the path to seeking the truth—which might or might not have practical consequences—through dialogue, instead of speaking of an essential incompatibility or a fight for the prevalence of one of them. I will return to this later.

Because the second question, which derives precisely from affirming that various methodologies can coexist without harming any of them, is: how can a harmonious dynamic be imagined? Even at the risk of seeming overly simplistic given the limited space remaining, I think it is necessary to make three essential points.

The first is that, in light of Smeyers’ veiled critique of the hermeneutic methodology, it is necessary to re-evaluate this focus (2011). Smeyers’ critique stated that the interpretation of authors responds to the whims of the author performing the hermeneutical exercise (2011) rather than to the agenda of politicians or the educational needs of the moment. But the thesis of Smeyers is not so much devalued because philosophers of education make interpretations of other *pure* philosophers to articulate essential points in their postures, but rather because hermeneutics

keeps alive the internal debate of PE with philosophy itself and with the postulates of earlier PE. In other words, the absence of hermeneutic exercises separates PE from its philosophical and theological setting—both ancient and contemporary—and from its most specific branch. It is another matter, and Smeyers discusses this wisely, that many of the hermeneutics performed have been deficient. Hermeneutics that focussed on texts which had the narrowly educational as their subject matter, instead of interpreting them in the light of other works by the same author covering important topics for understanding the educational, such as theology, metaphysics, anthropology, or gnoseology. Having said this, hermeneutics not only keeps alive the combination of PE with a previous broader or more specific tradition but it also brings new perspectives with which to approach education. This is the second point.

PE must unavoidably face education from two main perspectives. On the one hand, it must return to the concepts the first generation already faced. This is because, for reasons relating to the methodology they used and the historical period in which they were writing, they were unable to see certain aspects that are now decisive or that need to be reinterpreted in light of the new times. Also because the new sensibilities of the new educational philosophers can allow nuances that had gone unnoticed. Ultimately, all of other philosophical methodologies would come into play here, which, like hermeneutics and analytical philosophy, serve to confront

the phenomenon of education. Not just these other specific methodologies, but also the cosmological, anthropological, gnoseological, or moral interpretations that have gradually isolated them from educational reflection in favour of a certain psychologism and innovationism, and which feed the understanding of education from new directions. On the other hand, it is necessary to approach as yet unexplored aspects of the phenomenon of education that derive from current contexts and problems. Here, it becomes necessary not just to interpret new authors in light of the philosophy of education or the application of the analytical methodology to new educational problems, but also to have the awareness to apply new methodologies to new elements, to localise these aspects and the dialogue with other disciplines and agents involved in education. All of this is, I emphasise, in the interest of a better understanding of the phenomenon of education, which could result in an improvement of practice.

But, and this is the third consideration, all of the previous forms of PE must be regarded as different ways of approaching reality that, in the quality of their internal relationships, enable a more in-depth knowledge of educational reality, resulting in improved practice. In effect, education can be studied in itself with a solely theoretical aim and this does not have to lead to the isolation of the discipline if this exercise coexists with all of the other variations that are more concerned with practical improvements in education. The same could be said of

philosophers interested in the practical application: that as long as the philosophical premises of those who envisage practical consequences are, in effect, rigorous philosophical exercises and not mere prologues to rhetoric, then their position is needed. It is in the ability of philosophers to articulate the advances made by all of their colleagues—in texts they write alone or in sincere and detached collaborations with them and with other agents—that the future of the discipline is at stake. To put it another way, it is in the reciprocal epistemological relationship between the different variations that we could speak of a PE that is healthy, consistent, complex, and necessary for education. Because education, despite the rise of empiricism that can be seen in academic publications, it is not a conclusive and closed exercise: nobody knows the magic key to teaching and learning. For this very reason, the fact that there is a body of knowledge that enquires into each and every dimension of education, makes it possible to seek answers that might not appear in the data and that help educate with a better developed critical sense. Because, and this does seem to be clear, an educational practice guided by local data, fashions, and needs does not seem like it could raise the educational levels of different nations.

In brief, the plurality of the understandings of PE that marks the current moment should be seen as a strength which, if it can be integrated into a comprehensive framework whose dynamic is overseen by reciprocal relationships of academic interchange, will not only be

able to improve the different variations, but, taken as a whole, educational practice as well.

Notes

¹ PE from now on.

² This, incidentally, led to two interpretations of the same programme in which Peters' tendency towards ethics (McCulloch, 2002), in *Ethics and Education* (Peters, 1963), and Scheffler's tendency towards gnosiology, in *Conditions of Knowledge* (Scheffler, 1965), were observed.

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