Philosophy in Schools

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[Review of the book: *Philosophy in Schools,* by Felicity Haynes. Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 978-1138641105]

Philosophy in Schools is the third book included in the series *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. The series focuses on the theoretical perspectives suggested by the educational philosophy discourse and publishes special issues of the homonym journal edited by PESA (Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia). The book collects ten articles about successful and arduous implementations of philosophical education in schools in Australasia[1]. All the 14 contributors are experienced in philosophy and education, at school and/or University.

Australia is an emblematic example of the presence of philosophy in educational programs (UNESCO, 2007). In addition to associations and private organizations, a lot of schools started to practice philosophy in 1984. After the many efforts of some promoters, the person in charge of educational decisions accepted the idea of teaching philosophy in schools. Consequently, every Australian state has schools where philosophy is taught and, furthermore, philosophical courses are given from K-10 (from Kindergarten to 10 years-old pupils) to University. Philosophy as subject was first introduced in primary schools but the high-school curriculum has been providing philosophy classes since approximately ten years.

The idea of including philosophy in school curricula was born outside the mainstream of educational system. Laurence Splitter was the first to introduce the practice of "Philosophy for children" (P4C) in Australia after

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[1] Australasia, a region of Oceania, comprises Australia, New Zealand, the island of New Guinea, and neighboring islands in the Pacific Ocean.

having worked with Matthew Lipman, who was universally recognized as the creator of philosophical practice for children. Therefore, philosophy has become part of education programs through a gradual process displaying the creation of associations and the drafting of school textbooks. Although other philosophers have also spread their ideas on this subject, P4C is the most accepted in Australian schools.

In the third article of the book, Benade analyses curriculum documentation used in schools in New Zealand and Australia. Focusing on educational principles and the school directives of the two states, he notices that both Australian and New Zealand courses show a commitment to the development of democracy. The author points out how philosophy holds the potential to encourage democratic dispositions through the development of critical thinking. Nevertheless, the rigidity of the scope and sequence in the Australian curriculum, together with the specification of learning outcomes in the New Zealand curriculum, can limit the potential inherent in philosophical practice. Moreover, beyond the problems that may arise from the interpretation of the government guidelines on this matter, teachers may represent the biggest obstacle to the spread of philosophy in schools. Knight and Collins describe how the state of affairs currently displays on the one hand schools in which philosophy has been implemented successfully and, on the other hand, schools that oppose it. Relying on anecdotal evidence and research, the authors suggest that the main problem is the teachers' point of view: only a small minority of teachers recognize the benefits of philosophy in education. Some of them, on the contrary, think that young children are not capable of abstract thinking. Other teachers claim that asking controversial questions may offend some students, their family or the community. In order to overcome this problem it is necessary to invest in teacher training (Colombo & Varani, 2008), improve skills like reason-giving and reason for evaluation, and focus on the benefits of epistemic practice and reasoning skills for both teachers' and students' tasks.

With regards to higher levels of schooling, efforts in introducing philosophy in school curriculum also focus on content issues. Millet and Tapper explore the complex debate among policymakers, teachers, and educators about the role of philosophy in schools in relation to the education of values and the development of civic skills (UNESCO, 2015). In the Western Australian secondary school curriculum, the "Philosophy and Ethics" course is a new subject field that differs from religion and gives ethics a prominent status. In fact, a philosophical approach, which follows

an outcome-based approach and is informed by the principles of John Dewey and Lev Vigotsky, helps people to reflect on ethical issues.

Most of the contributors in the book analyze how philosophy, and especially the "community of inquiry", can be considered an integral part of the school teaching. The community of inquiry is a common tool in philosophical practice. It is a community of students and teachers who are engaged in an inquiry or, in other words, a context that leads to questioning, reasoning, deliberating (Gardner, 2015).

In the first chapter of the book, Cam focuses on values. He claims that our society tends to inculcate a private rather than a public conception of values. Including philosophy in school curriculum can help children to discover that responsibility for values belongs to both the personal and social spheres. From this point of view, the philosophical inquiry enables pupils and students to participate in an open society (Ferrari, 2016). At the same time, focusing the attention on "learning that" more than on "learning how" favours the development of skills in critical reflection, consideration of alternative possibilities, and a genuine concern for truth and clarity. During an investigation on the influence of community of inquiry on the development of middle-year students, Poulton analyzes students' dialogues and wonders if it is possible to identify indicators that suggest developmental strands and, consequently, if it is possible to link learning to assessment in a framework of philosophical thinking. The study has produced a standard-referenced framework and provided indicators that middle-year students, within a community of inquiry, develop bands of philosophical thinking that have more to do with developing the skills of dialogue than with mastering external critical thinking rules and knowledge. In addition, however, the study shows that, at the end of the philosophical practice, the students have achieved a state of intentional open-mindedness and, on occasions, the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and engage in a non-defensive way.

In the last article of the book, Vansieleghem suggests that philosophy is useful for the child who engages in the process of constructing his/her self. Thanks to the experience of philosophizing and the participation in a community of inquiry, children become their own agents through a desubjectifying or limit-experience (Brenifier, 2007). They meet their possibility to think and are confronted with the unthinkable and the unbearable. In other words, philosophy directs children to live with the unpredictability of their selves, the others' and the world's.

Another significant debate concerns the presence of philosophy in schools as formal subject or as informal background. Doddington analyzes various programs in which children can encounter philosophy and, among these, she focuses her attention on the informal ones. She suggests that philosophy should not become another subject but rather be encouraged as a more generalized feature of education. "Doing" philosophy means reconsidering Dewey's ideas: children must authentically invest themselves in communication and be "ready" to experience. Philosophy must be a wondering attitude and teachers should not stop the inquiry.

The essay written by Stewart deals with some curriculum reforms in the schools of New Zealand and focuses on a contradiction that is not easily reconcilable. On the one hand, proposing philosophy as a sort of tool or a context for approaching a subject, such as social studies, can improve critical and creative thinking. Unfortunately, this is not the main purpose for schools at the moment. Conversely, schools are expected to engender in students specific goals expressed as a set of principles, values, and key competences (Colom, Moriyón, Magro & Morilla, 2014). On the other hand, introducing philosophy as a subject seems to guide school near the trap that it is actually trying to escape: justifying curriculum content only on the basis of its inherent values. The risk, in this case, is of self-referential curriculum proposal. Another example of contradiction, according to the author, is the Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM) that is a separate school system, based on Māori culture and instituted to meet the needs of the Māori minority inside a monoculture school system. "Kaupapa" means "philosophy" and "political cause": New Zealand recognized the frustrations of a disadvantaged social group, and started an educational reform implying that philosophy goes beyond the curriculum to permeate every level of the structure and the practice of the school. However, if KKM schools are based on Māori philosophies while mainstream schools are based on Western philosophies, philosophy serves only to further entrench the cultural bias of the hidden curriculum. Therefore, improving the critical reflection about the content of the subjects and the curriculum seems to be of the utmost importance. The community of inquiry can be a useful tool to reach this goal.

Finally, the book provides interesting reflections about the role of philosophy in promoting freedom and in critically analyzing the rules established to ensure order. Philosophy can play an important role in the maintenance or in the subversion of social patterns and stratifications. Thompson and Lasic reflect on the success and the failure of the "Philosophy

and Ethics" course at Marri College, which is a public school in an underprivileged socioeconomic context in Perth. Starting from the Deleuzian notions of geophilosophy and nomadic thought, the course provided students with tools for critical freedom, personal and social transformation in order to overcome social prejudices. The failure of the course appears as a "missed opportunity" and a "self-fulfilling prophecy": "Philosophy and Ethics" was one of the students' most favourite courses but the administration of the school and part of the teachers were not comfortable with it. They claimed that philosophy was not suitable for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The course was provided with inadequate resources, students' final grades fell and, thus, the course was not offered as a subject choice in the following year. A possible explanation of this phenomenon can be found in chapter 8. Fitzsimons argues that the words "school" and "philosophy" can belong together, but it is important to understand both their meaning and the ways in which they belong to each other. Philosophy in schools, and generally in every institution considered to be educational, can be both "harmless" and "dangerous". A "harmless" philosophy remains inside the walls of educational institutions as a set of reasoned, reasonable and probably acceptable activities. It converts itself into a knowledge industry, proposing contents or tools for practicing critical thinking within a context that preserves its specific and defined structure. This kind of approach can increase the ability of students and teachers to improve their skills according to standards. Moreover, this approach can meet the expectations of the educational institution, the legislation, and the society. However, it does not challenge the *status quo*. Conversely, philosophy as a dangerous tool fosters interest, creativity, and discoveries in classrooms. According to this approach, philosophy cares about the critical and the imaginative, wholly at odds with a professional and behaviourist emphasis. Echoing Nietzsche's work, it is important "to philosophize with a hammer", breaking the narrow boundaries of the school system and opening to new ways of looking at things. "Dangerous" philosophy pushes schools to go beyond their current functioning as government-directed networks of social and cultural subjectivity. In this sense, it is able to promote political, conceptual, and social transformation.

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