From Disguised Nonsense to Patent Nonsense: Thinking Philosophically

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1. Introduction: the 'analytic tradition' of philosophy

Few university departments of education now offer courses in the philosophy of education despite the fact that philosophical problems permeate the educational questions which we need to address. Political answers to educational problems are too often muddled because they have not addressed questions about the nature and division of knowledge, about what is worth learning, about the relation of theory to practice, or about who should control learning. Such have always been the province of philosophy from Plato onwards, namely, epistemology (that is, theory of knowledge), ethics (that is, exploring what is good and worthwhile), political philosophy (that is, the exploration of what we mean by justice and the relation of the individual to the political power).

Of course, we think we know what is meant by 'education', or by what is meant by 'having learnt something', or by 'high standards of achievement' (as in the political responses to the four yearly PISA international comparison of standards). But it is the traditional job of philosophy from Plato onwards to scratch beneath the surface of 'agreed meanings' and to show that what was thought to be clear is in fact very muddled, leading to unacceptable consequences. Language, as the philosopher Wittgenstein demonstrated, can so easily 'bewitch the intelligence by the use of words', thereby leading to the belief that life is much less complicated than it really is. A major task of philosophy is to make people –especially those who think they have the right answer– puzzled, unsure that they really are right, recognising the need to think more clearly.

A very good example of this is provided by Plato in the *Republic* (Part I, 338). The rather arrogant Thrasymachus defines 'justice or right' as 'what is in the interest of the stronger party'. Socrates sees a problem in that definition. What is meant by 'in the interest of'? Socrates enlarges on his puzzlement. For instance, Polydamas the athlete is *stronger* than us, and it's *in his interest* to eat beef to keep fit; we are *weaker* than him, but you can't *mean* that the same diet is *in our interest* and so right for us?'

Thrasymachus now gets irritated as he refines his original definition to embrace the state or government as the stronger party. In other words, those in power are the ones who define what is right and just –which, in fact, would often seem to be the case. Socrates presses on with the possible objections to this definition, providing counter examples. Eventually, Thrasymachus exits in a fit of temper. What seemed straightforward had been proved not to have been so.

Typical of what is referred to as 'socratic dialogue' is the constant questioning of 'what do you mean?' Behind the apparent clarity of the words used are different 'usages' conveying important differences of meaning. But Plato (or Socrates) was not simply going through the mechanical motions of asking 'what do you mean?' whenever someone said something he disagreed with. In most every day conversations, there is no ambiguity and no significant disagreement about meaning. It would be odd indeed if, when someone asked you to sit on that chair, you responded by asking 'what do you mean by 'sit' or 'chair". However, the meaning of many words is 'contested'. That is, beneath superficial agreement there are deeper disagreements, too often not recognised in disputations. The world of education is full of them, as I shall illustrate in what follows –for example, what it means to be educated, or what counts as having understood a scientific explanation, or what do you mean by 'skill training'.

Much philosophy of education (within what is often referred to as 'analytic philosophy' or 'linguistic analysis') is within the tradition of Plato as exemplified in the Socratic dialogues. Plato was aware of ambiguity in words which played a pivotal role in the other person's argument. A lot hung on a particular and contestable interpretation. By giving counter-examples, he was able to bring this out –and (as in the example above) revealed the distinctively moral nature of the discourse on justice. Moreover, that verbal probing led to deeper questions about the nature of the state and its relations to the individual members of the state– indeed, to the constitution of the Republic and to the form of education appropriate to the future citizens of the Republic. There is an interconnection of 'meanings' through which we understand the social world and act intelligently within it. One task of the philosopher, and of the philosopher of education in particular, is to examine critically the understandings embodied in the language of the social world which affect the policy and practice of education.

It is within such a tradition that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958) declared:

> «my aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense» (1:464)

There is a lot of disguised nonsense in what educational policy makers say and in what educational researchers write. This I shall illustrate though the importance attached to such policies as: first, the need to produce a more *skilled* workforce; second, to distinguish between *academic and vocational* learning and cour-

ses; third, to raise *standards* especially in the light of the PISA international comparisons; fourth, to improve the quality of *teaching*.

2. Working through examples

2.1. Promoting a 'skilled workforce'

In Britain, as no doubt in most countries, there is deep concern about the need for a more skilled workforce if the country is to compete successfully in the 'global economy'. Too many leave school without qualification and try to enter employment without the necessary skills. For this reason, a report was commissioned by the Government to find out what skills were needed in the future, how many skilled workers there were currently, and what must be done to close the gap. Therefore, the consequent Leitch Review (2006), *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: World Class Skills* argued that the economy by 2020 would require only 600,000 unskilled workers as opposed to the seven million today. Hence, the sense of crisis. However, other research contradicts this, suggesting that there will remain the seven million jobs requiring workers without skills. Who is correct?

However, the problem of deciding who is correct is partly a conceptual one. Is the word 'skill' being used in the same way? It would surely have to be so if one is to add up the number of non-skilled workers to 600,000 or to seven million. So, what do we mean by a 'skill'? We talk of a person being a skilled orator (even though what he or she has to say is superficial), of a skilled carpenter, of a skilled ballet dancer, even of skilled thinkers amongst whom one would need to include Plato's Sophists (and there are now courses in 'thinking skills').

There are, indeed, overlapping meanings. But *assimilating* these uses from different contexts leads to the wrong belief that there is more in common than there really is. For example, assumptions are made about 'transfer of learning skills' which permeate different kinds of thinking. Policies are promoted for the development of skills *as such* in order to overcome the predicted shortage. Is this not a case of being deceived by the assimilation of meanings through the shared use of a word? As Wittgenstein pointed out, assimilating the descriptions of the uses of words in this way cannot make the uses themselves any more like one another. For, as we see, they are absolutely unlike.

Therefore, whether or not the economy will need only 600,000 unskilled workers by 2020 is not an empirical matter (for example, adding up the number of skills), but a conceptual one. It all depends on what one means by 'skill', and there will be as many differences of meaning as there are contexts in which the word 'skill' is applied.

Let us take, for an example, the task of cleaning, in which many are occupied but on very low wages. Is cleaning a skilled job or not? And if it is classified as a skilled job, is that because it requires one skill or several –sweeping up the dirt, removing stains, polishing the furniture? If these are separate skills, do they need separate training courses (as well as experience) for the cleaner to be a good clea-

ner? It is not clear whether 'cleaning' is or is not included in the Leitch Report's enumeration of the skilled workforce required by 2020. It all depends on what one means.

2.2. Distinguishing between academic and vocational

The distinction is constantly made between 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects. The former is identified with the acquisition of knowledge and understanding which can be written down and thereby assessed. The latter is associated with the training of skills (howsoever difficult it is, upon reflection, to define a skill) useful for doing a job effectively. The former is seen as part of a general *education*, with all the social associations of that. The latter is often used synonymously with practical learning –training in a specific skill as a preparation for specific employment. As a result of this distinction, so-called vocational studies are provided for the 'less academic', and the 'academically able' learners do not touch the 'vocational'. Indeed, the new bench-mark of educational success in England (the EBacc or English Baccalaureate) is a six subject *academic* award.

But what does one mean by 'academic'? It would seem that it refers to those studies which are essentially book-based and can be examined through written work. But what of the arts (for example, painting, dance or drama)? These are neither academic in that sense nor vocational in the sense of training in a set of skills useful for employment. Furthermore, 'design and technology' neither fits the academic model nor is vocational in this narrow sense. Hence, the dualism between academic and vocational, when examined, does not make sense. It is part of the 'disguised nonsense', resulting, first, in the demotion of the arts and design and technology from general education for all, second, in the failure to see the kind of intelligence and the practical knowledge which are embodied within demanding practical activities, third, in the perpetuation of the distinction between two radically different kinds of learners.

All this has implications for when we come to answer the question: 'what do we mean by an educated person?' Should our view of the 'educated person' include the capacity to engage intelligently in practical matters without the theoretical insight which no doubt a more 'academic' learning might have brought about? And should that idea of 'the educated person' exclude the person who is good at theorising, but fails to relate that theory to the practical issues and problems which confront us? Many were the highly intelligent economists whose theoretical knowledge did not prepare them for the universal recession and thus for the practical problems of running an economy.

The philosopher John Dewey saw 'false dualisms' in the way we think about the world and the problems we face (for example, between the mind and the body, between traditional and progressive education, between education and training, between knowledge and experience, between academic and vocational) as a significant barrier to thinking properly –a matter of language 'bewitching the intelligence'. Thus, he saw 'vocational' to refer to

> «a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person because of the consequences they accomplish… The opposite of a career is neither leisure nor culture [another false dualism], but aimlessness … the absence of cumulative achievements in experience…» (Dewey, 1916, 307).

In other words, the poverty of the dualistic contrast between the academic education and vocational training is revealed when a deeper examination is given of the aims of education.

2.3. *Pursuit of higher standards*

Every four years, the OECD reports on the comparative standards of 15 year olds in reading, writing and science across 63 countries in what is called the Performance of International Student Achievement (PISA). These are taken very seriously by Governments –either confirming that their policies are right (when they come out on top of the international league tables) or indicating that much more needs to be done if they are to move up the tables. Pursuit of higher standards is at the top of the political agenda. Economic difficulties are blamed in part on 'poor standards' in schools. That pursuit of higher standards is translated into the setting of targets within what is called 'total quality management' or TQM.

TQM requires precise definition of standards in terms of targets (the attainment of which can be measured) and of the conditions which spur teachers to reach those targets, in particular, accountability with high status testing, and parental choice made in the light of the publication of test scores. However, one needs to ask what one means by 'high standards'. What is lacking in this reduction of standards to the language of TQM is any sense of vision of what education is for, or of logical connection of the language of measurable performances to that of educational values and quality of learning.

The consequence is that standards are identified with the targets which are increasingly narrowed so that they can be more easily measured. To improve standards, one needs to spell these out in detailed specifications of 'can do's', teach more effectively to these targets, measure the outcomes, evaluate the programme in the light of the results, and possibly change the targets or means of getting them in the light of the evaluation. Research by Warwick Mansell (2007) demonstrates clearly the 'gaming' which such a politically inspired testing regime encourages. The 'games' which teachers play in order to hit the targets have nothing to do with the quality of learning.

It is necessary, therefore, to think critically about what we mean by standards, about their identification with performance indicators, and about their absorption into the language of TQM with all its consequences for policy.

Standards are the bench-marks by which we assess whether the aims of an activity have been met, and thus they depend on the nature of the activity. The standards by which we assess whether someone is a competent driver depend on

what one means by 'good driving'. That would no doubt include not only the ability to use the gears and brakes appropriately but also the values concerned with driving safely. Similarly, 'high standards' in education depend logically upon the aims of education –what one means by an educated person. Does 'hitting the targets' in reading constitute 'high standards' when the student gains no interest in reading literature– indeed, might well be put off by the training to pass the tests?

The logical problem with the testing industry, which now dominates student learning in so many countries, is that the indicators, which can be measured, are not the same thing as the states of mind which they are indicators of. There is confusion between the aims, on the one hand, and, on the other, the indicators by which one assesses that the aims have been reached –between the quality of learning and the finite and limited modes of evidence for the quality of learning.

Moreover, standards cannot logically be the sort of thing which go up or down. If that were the case, then that going up or down could be assessed only by reference to a higher level standards by which up or down might be judged. But those higher level standards, by which the lower level standards are to be judged might also be seen to go up or down –and so on *ad infinitum*.

2.4. Teaching

The fourth example of the need to pursue the meaning of a key concept in educational studies, about which there has been much research, is that of teaching. The meaning of teaching may seem quite obvious. But is it?

First it is important to distinguish teaching as a 'task word' from teaching as an 'achievement word'. To say that someone is teaching (in the sense of a *task word*) is to describe a particular sort of activity –namely, that of someone trying to get another person to learn something. As an *achievement word*, however, it is to claim that someone has successfully learnt that which the teacher was trying to get them to learn. If that intended learner never learns anything as intended (that is, there is no teaching in the sense of *achievement*), then one might question whether teaching is an appropriate description of the task –and, in so doing, eliminate many claims to be teaching.

Take for example the following. The university professor, in lecturing to the undergraduates on nuclear fission, reads the same notes as he has done for several years. The veracity of his notes has not been affected by subsequent theoretical developments. Formally, she would be fulfilling her obligations as a university teacher. But would she be teaching? What she says bears little relation to the present knowledge of the students. There is no attempt to connect her words (and their meanings within physics) to the understandings within the minds of the students. Or take the teacher who, having to take a class in biology and having only minimum knowledge of the key ideas or concepts, downloads teaching notes from the web and follows those faithfully. But would he be teaching? Can one be said to

be teaching if either one does not have a grasp of the subject matter to be taught or one has no idea of the level of understanding of those to be taught? A lot of so-called teaching falls into one of these two categories.

Teaching, therefore, involves someone –the teacher– intending someone else to learn something (e.g. the concept of osmosis) by performing a task which is both a *logically* related to the concept of 'osmosis', and yet *psychologically* within the grasp of the learner. It requires therefore, first, understanding by the teacher of that which is to be taught, second, a understanding of the current levels of understanding of the learners, and, third, the ability (the pedagogical skills) to link the two –that is, to affect the thinking of the learners through the introduction of the new concepts or theory.

However, this purely conceptual point, though important, does not yet do justice to how the word 'teaching' operates within what Wittgenstein referred to as 'a form of life'. Different philosophers go beyond this, given their different presuppositions about the aims of education or what is worth learning or what it means to be human. They see a moral dimension to what it means to be a teacher. The word 'teacher', as with any other word that has a history, is learnt and understood within 'a form of life'. The simple definition does not reflect that. Rather does the concept of teaching partakes in a wider understanding of what it means to help young people flourish as human beings through access to a culture which enhances our understand of humanity and of what is worth learning. John Dewey, for example, referred to teachers as 'the true prophet and the usherers in of the kingdom of God'. But what is meant by 'culture' to which access is being given or by 'enhancing our understanding of humanity'?

2.5. *Interim conclusion*

The insights gained from such philosophical deliberations about 'what one means' reveals the complex way in which language shapes our understanding. Careful analysis of usage challenges the impoverished understandings of key concepts such as those of 'teaching', 'skill' and 'standards' –and thereby the consequent target-driven, high-stakes testing culture which now prevails. It challenges, too, the false dualisms which shape our understanding of educational policy and practice. In each case, the analysis points to deeper questions which occupy philosophers: in ethics, concerning what is worth learning, in epistemology, what it means to acquire knowledge and understanding, in the philosophy of mind, what is the relation between thought and the world we think about, and in social and political philosophy as to who should control education. How we teach and what we think is worth teaching, embody deeper assumptions about the value of what is learnt, about the logical nature of that which is to be learnt, and about the relation of what is learnt to the wider culture we have inherited.

The rest of this paper focuses upon the ethical issues.

3. Educating persons

3.1. Descriptive and evaluative senses of 'education'

The pursuit of 'higher standards', and, in that pursuit, the pursuit of 'total quality management', has transformed the language of education. The aims of education become the *targets* which have to be sufficiently specific for the attainment of them to be easily measured through national tests. Those areas of learning, therefore, which do not help with the attainment of those targets get demoted, because they do not help with the *performance indicators* which are checked through regular *audits*. The teachers, far from being 'the true prophets and the usherers in of the kingdom of God', are referred to as the *deliverers of the curriculum* –something which is written and handed down from elsewhere (now, in England, by an all powerful Secretary of State). And if they deliver the curriculum successfully (as reflected in test scores), they are paid accordingly– *payment by results*.

This is yet a further example of how language, in this case taken from the business world, has transformed how education is understood and indeed practised. But is it not a further case of 'disguised nonsense', requiring philosophical thinking to reveal it as 'patent nonsense'? It is important, therefore, to attend carefully to usage of the word 'education' within our ordinary language.

There is a need to distinguish between the descriptive and the evaluative senses of 'education'. Descriptively it refers to those activities and institutions, the aim of which is to bring about learning amongst those who attend. Thus, in asking where one was educated, one would name the school or university. But there is the evaluative sense where one talks of the 'educated person' or when, to use the words of John Dewey, the so-called 'education' was in effect a 'mis-education' –the result was boredom, and disinclination to continue with one's studies. Thus, in the dominant evaluative sense, education implies not simply that learning has taken place, but that the learning was worthwhile. The learner was thereby a better person. In that respect, the word 'educated' is similar to 'reformed'. To say that someone is reformed is to say that in respect of some change in character or behaviour the person has changed for the better –he is no longer violent, for example.

However, such considerations push us into the area of ethics. What are those characteristics of being a person, and thus of what it means to become a better person, which constitute the aims of education? One problem with so many educational 'reforms' is that such a question is rarely pursued. Perhaps we do need to train young people for the world of work and for the skills which the global economy demands from the 'educational system'. But in what way does such a pursuit make the learners better persons? What are the qualities, the kinds of knowledge, the dispositions (or virtues) which must be fostered if the learners are to be considered 'educated persons'?

3.2. The form of the personal

The philosopher John Macmurray referred to 'the form of the personal', indi-

cating that there is something distinctive about calling something 'a person' (see Macmurray, 1961). The failure to see that distinctiveness (as when the pupil is treated as an object to be changed with a view to raising the school's scores in the national tests), then there is the danger of not respecting the pupils as persons. John Dewey's critique of schooling in America lay in the prevalence of education as a 'transmission of knowledge'. Knowledge so transmitted led to superficial learning, possible enough for the passing of tests, but leaving the pupils much as they were. In no way were they significantly affected or transformed as persons.

The philosopher Peter Strawson (1959, 102) argued for the 'logical primitiveness of the concept of a person' –its indispensability in our account of the world, not reducible to the concept of a physical object even though it is attributed to physical objects. It predicates of them certain characteristics which we cannot dispense with, whether implicitly or explicitly, in our relations with other people or in our making sense of ourselves and of the world around us. In that sense, 'person' is a fundamental category of understanding just as 'physical object' or 'causality' is. It is a predisposition of understanding and communication.

The 'form of the personal' has three interrelated aspects: first, that of the capacity to think and feel; the second, that of the interrelationship with other persons in community; the third, that of a moral being in the sense both of someone capable of moral judgement and purposes and of someone deserving respect.

Therefore, the process of educating young people –in developing them as persons– needs to respect what is distinctive of them *as persons*. That distinctive endowment includes the capacity to reason —acquire the key ideas through which we have come to understand the physical, social and moral worlds we inhabit, to deliberate about the ends to be pursued and to adopt the relevant actions to attain such ends. By acquiring such ideas each person develops a degree of autonomy, the capacity to weigh evidence, the ability to question received assumptions, the imagination to see future possibilities. Such a development of mind is made possible by participation in what Oakeshott referred to as the conversation between the 'generations of mankind' –the ways in which others have come to see the world in science, religion, history, drama, poetry or literature. There is an inheritance, and education is concerned with all young people entering into that inheritance and thereby enabled to be in control as much as possible of their own destinies. Respect for young people as persons requires helping them to enter these different 'realms of meaning' at whatever level they are capable –and not to be rejected as ineducable, and thereby undermined in their development as persons. It is also to respect the *process* of thinking and reasoning, the struggle of each and every young person to make sense of the situation they are in, rather than to reduce that 'learning' to the performances in which they are trained but which may bear little relation to the ways in which they understand the world.

Furthermore, the emotions are a mode of insight and knowing, not intrinsically

irrational. They embody judgements or reasons, correct or incorrect appraisal of the facts of the situation about which, for example, one feels angry. Richard Peters (1974) spoke of the education and refinement of the emotions, made possible because of their cognitive element, and in particular the place of the arts in such refinement. The 'aesthetic' should be seen as a highly significant form of knowing and judgment.

There is an important sense in which persons are not, and cannot be totally autonomous. Growth depends on relations with other people, participating in different cultural communities. These might be the communities of scientists across the ages, the community of one's village or family, the community of one's religion. We inevitably develop as members of communities. That is essential to being a person, requiring an awareness of others, how they think and feel, and aware of how interrelationships with others enrich life, expand experience and lead to a greater capacity for reasoning. Knowledge grows through criticism. But that awareness of others, the appreciation of their points of view, and the capacity to relate to others have to be nurtured. Indeed, that implicit knowledge of, and inter-relationship with others is primary, because it is only through such knowledge and relationships, and through acting with or against them, that experience is expanded, challenged and refined. Learning to live and interrelate with others is central to the 'form of the personal'.

Finally, to recognise others as persons is to attribute moral qualities. They can be responsible for their actions. They are able not only to reason about the most effective means to some goal but to deliberate about the goals worth pursuing. We attribute to persons the capacity for self-determination in the light of the values which they have adopted. But that requires the nurturing of those dispositions or virtues through which one pursues what is seen to be the life worth living.

How then through education might one nurture those feelings, emotions and virtues which are seen to be worthwhile?

3.3. Educating the whole person

These three aspects of 'being a person' (the capacities for reasoning, for inter-relating with other persons in community and for deliberating about the ends worth pursuing) are dimensions of 'the whole person', inter-related and overlapping. The education of persons, therefore, would principally be concerned with nurturing those capacities for a fully human life –the capacities for what Dewey referred to as the 'intelligent management of life', namely, the capacities to reason in its various forms, to establish worthwhile ends, to recognise others as persons with whom one can interact productively, and to carry out what one sees to be worthwhile. Indeed, Michael Oakeshott argued that 'man (sic) is what he learns to become: this is the human condition' (Oakeshott, 1975, 17).

To respect the learners as persons, therefore, requires supporting the growth of such capacities. It requires respecting them as centres of consciousness, as potentially self-determining, as having their own mode of well-being, as open to development as human beings with all the dif-

ferent capacities for a distinctive human life which that entails –not as objects to be manipulated and used for others' purposes. This brings education and its language within the province of ethics, not within that of the 'business world'.

Most societies have some idea (or possibly competing ideas) of the transforming qualities, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understandings which help create the more fully developed and 'educated person'. It is difficult to think about education without addressing questions about the qualities which constitute or lead to a worthwhile form of life. Therefore, one can see why there are inevitably disagreements in society over what precisely a good education should consist of. People disagree about the qualities which make someone more fully a person, or what are the most important virtues to be nurtured (truthfulness, humility, obedience, caring for others?) or what knowledge, in this day and age, is important, or what skills one needs to be trained in. What questions, for instance, should people be asking about the environment or about moral issues concerning race or gender? What knowledge and skills are needed for answering them? Therefore, within the broad ethical considerations of what it means to be and to grow as a person, there remains much room for further ethical argument.

4. Education and the disciplines of philosophical thinking

Too often, I have argued, language lulls us into a frame of mind in which matters seem simple and straightforward. However, that simplicity belies the complexity of the usage of words, such that often the apparent agreement on their use hides the differences of meanings, and such hidden meanings make important assumptions of a philosophical nature. Failure to recognise this in educational discourse and practice does, for example, blind one to the essentially moral context and language of education. One result is the hi-jacking of that language by a language of efficiency gains, of measurable targets, and of curriculum delivery. Therefore, questions about the aims of education are rarely pursued.

However, such a transformation of language cannot completely remove the evaluative meaning of education through which we explore what it means to help people to develop those distinctive qualities whereby they flourish as persons. That takes us into the realm of ethics, exploring what it means to be a person and consider what sort of learning is worth pursuing. Questions about the aims of education are essentially a part of ethics.

However, as already indicated, the pursuit of such questions raises other and different kinds of philosophical issues. If education is concerned, amongst other qualities, about the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, then questions inevitably arise about what one means by knowledge as opposed to mere opinion. What counts as knowledge in terms of truth conditions and the verification of what is believed? Can one teach anything with certainty, and if not, are there degrees of doubt? And are there different kinds of knowledge, each with their distinctive modes of enquiry, evidence and tests for

truth? These are all matters explored in the theory of knowledge or epistemology. Perhaps it is the case that the dualism between academic and vocational is partly due to the failure to see practical activities as involving knowledge ('knowing how') which can be grasped at different levels of understanding and undertaken with different degrees of intelligence.

The point is that we do live in a world of ideas. These ideas, embodied in our language, shape our thinking about practice in many unacknowledged ways. By constantly asking, as did Socrates, 'what do you mean?' one comes to realise the complexity of the meanings or usages behind words which, on the surface, seem so straightforward. One function of philosophy is to make those ideas explicit, to subject them to criticism, and to influence practice, not by providing alternative theories or bodies of knowledge for the guidance of practice, but by ensuring that the assumptions behind practice are tenable and coherent.

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Resumen:
Del sin sentido disfrazado al sin sentido descubierto: pensando filosóficamente

Una de las tareas del filósofo de la educación es examinar críticamente los implícitos del lenguaje contenidos en las formulaciones que afectan a la política y la práctica de la educación. Dentro de esa tradición, el filósofo Ludwig Wittgenstein, declaró: «mi objetivo es: enseñarte a pasar de decir cosas sin sentido de manera disfrazada, a poner al descubierto esos sinsentidos». Hay mucho «sinsentido disfrazado» en lo que dicen los responsables de las políticas educativas y en lo que escriben muchos investigadores en educación. Apoyaré estas afirmaciones con ejemplos tomados de la realidad. Así, en

primer lugar, la importancia que se atribuye a la «preparación de profesionales competentes para el mercado laboral»; en segundo lugar, la separación que se establece entre la «formación académica» y la «formación profesional»; en tercer lugar, el interés en «elevar los estándares» educativos, especialmente a la luz de las comparaciones internacionales realizadas por el informe PISA; y, por último el discurso sobre la necesidad de mejorar la «calidad de la enseñanza».

Descriptores: Educación, filosofía de la educación, política educativa, Wittgenstein, Sócrates, standards, Pisa.

Summary: From Disguised Nonsense to Patent Nonsense: Thinking Philosophically

One task of the philosopher, and of the philosopher of education in particular, is to examine critically the understandings embodied in the language of the social world which affect the policy and practice of education. It is within such a tradition that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein declared: «my aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense». There is a lot of disguised nonsense in what educational policy makers say and in what educational researchers write. This I shall illustrate though the importance attached to such policies as: first, the need to produce a more *skilled* workforce; second, to distinguish between *academic and vocational* learning and courses; third, to raise *standards* especially in the light of the PISA international comparisons; fourth, to improve the quality of *teaching*.

Key Words: Philosophy of education, educational policy, Wittgenstein, Socrates, academic standards, PISA.