

What Shall We Do with the Children?

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In a fascinating article (which, parenthetically, manages to find more meaning in what I suggested – parenthetically – about Dewey, philosophy, and education than I probably intended or was aware of; which means that I would agree that, although true, my claim was also a little far-fetched), Stefano Oliverio (re)turns to what seems to have become one of the perennial questions in philosophy of education; namely, how we should understand the relationship between its two components, the philosophical and the educational. If we leave aside, for the moment, the possibility that philosophy of education is simply a historical mistake,¹ that is, something that should never have happened in the first place, and accept that philosophy of education is “here to stay,” the first question Oliverio raises is where philosophy of education is actually staying, that is, what place it is occupying or trying to occupy.

Rather than simply locating philosophy of education in the middle ground between general philosophy and empirical educational research, Oliverio invokes a much more complex and dynamic image. Here, philosophy of education is being pushed forward (or is it being pushed out?) from its origin in general philosophy, but then finds its road blocked by empirical educational research. Not philosophical enough, according to the standards of philosophy, and not empirical enough, according to the standards of educational research, it tries to compensate for its lack of competence by offering the philosophical to empirical research and the empirical to philosophy. In doing so, if I understand Oliverio’s account correctly, it hides from each that it actually lacks the competence to do so, at least in the eyes of those “on behalf” of which philosophy of education seems to be speaking (which, I think, is what Oliverio denotes with this wonderful word *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*).

Having characterized the particular predicament in which contemporary philosophy of education finds itself – a predicament from which, if I understand it correctly, philosophy of education neither can nor should want to escape – Oliverio then goes on to explore how philosophy and education might differ or, in the formulation I have suggested in a number of places,² how philosophical questions might be different from educational questions. Oliverio does so through an investigation into the *Herkunft* of philosophy of education, where *Herkunft* is not to be understood as origin – that is as a “point zero” or a “Big Bang” – but as the question of its emergence, as Oliverio puts it, which perhaps we can also understand as the question of its pedigree.

Oliverio first discusses Dewey’s views, highlighting his suggestion that, at least within the context of European philosophy, philosophy originated “from the direct pressure of educational questions”³ – which means that, for Dewey, philosophy and education emerged *together*, rather than one being the origin of the other. This is a very significant insight, as it challenges the all too common assumption that education is simply an offshoot of philosophy; an insight that may also have implications for

the position of philosophy of education. I will return to this below. Although Dewey identifies a number of these educational questions, the issue that is singled out by Oliverio is Dewey's question of what the relationship is "of knowledge, of reason, to practice, to custom, and to the opinions that go with custom."⁴

Education thus emerges, so Oliverio concludes, "when it is no longer the mere re-production of a community ruled by custom, but it is the domain where the challenge obtains as to how to come to terms with the radical discontinuity represented by the interruption of the new generation and to manage their novelty and their potential of change of custom by re-establishing forms of continuity, which should not amount, however, to a sheer replication."⁵ Here, Oliverio sees a difference with Platonic *paideia*, which does not seem to be interested in the educational "issue" of the "coming of the new into the world," but is rather about establishing "a stable and stabilizing regime of relationships between the youth and the adults" and, if I understand Oliverio's argument correctly, using (and perhaps we could say: abusing) philosophy to do so. If Platonic *paideia* thus uses philosophy to "stabilize" the new, Dewey, on the other hand, seems to argue that the task of philosophy is precisely to "help the potential of novelty, intrinsic in the interruption of new generations, not to dissolve into emptiness."⁶

Now, from this Oliverio concludes that there is "an intimate bond between philosophy and education,"⁷ but that this intimate bond precisely means that education and philosophy are not the same and cannot be reduced to each other, albeit that they have a shared history; that is, that they emerged together in a "polemic commonality."⁸

If this is an adequate reconstruction of the main lines of Oliverio's argument, then the question is what we need to make of this. Let me make a number of observations and suggestions and raise a few questions.

One thing that I find helpful is that Oliverio shows the ambiguity in Dewey's position. Whereas on the one hand – and this was what I was referring to with my parenthetical claim of imperialism – Dewey seems to argue that educational questions *are* philosophical questions, Dewey also provides an argument for suggesting that education and philosophy emerged conjointly, but nonetheless separately. In addition to this, and in distinction from Plato, Dewey sees a task for philosophy in securing that the new can "arrive" in the world, which Oliverio, also with reference to my work, identifies as the central educational concern. While this is not a full-blown defence of Dewey, the discussion is indeed helpful for keeping an eye on the *difference* between philosophy and education, something Oliverio also makes clear by showing that both emerged at the same time rather than that the one emerged out of the other.

While this clarifies quite a lot about the relationship between philosophy and education, I am not yet sure what this says about philosophy *of education*. Is philosophy of education the "place" where, or perhaps the "form" through which, this intimate bond of philosophy and education is enacted? And if so, what does this mean for philosophy of education and for the particular predicament with which Oliverio started his paper? Or is Oliverio actually providing an argument for the

superfluity of philosophy of education, as the “work” that needs to be done to support the educational challenge of “preserving and valorising the potential of new” seems to be *philosophical* work rather than philosophy-of-education work? I am curious to hear what Oliverio has to say about this, also in light of the fact that in his paper he seems to assume that philosophy of education simply “exists,” rather than, as he has done so well with regard to philosophy and education, pondering its genealogy, which could suggest that one of my other exaggerations - namely that philosophy of education is a historical mistake - may perhaps deserve some further exploration.

The other question I have concerns Oliverio’s apparent agreement with Dewey’s suggestion – and perhaps already with Aristophanes’ insight – that the educational problematic has to do with “how to allow the new to come into presence in its novelty.”⁹ A quick way to make my point is to say that I actually do not think that the educational concern is adequately understood as a concern for the new or, in Dewey’s formulation, that it has to do with making sure that establishing social continuity in light of “the interruption of new generations” does not result in “sheer replication.” I would contend, against Dewey, that the educational concern is not about identity but about subjectivity; that is, it is about the possibility for the new generation to exist as subject. It is, in other words, the “quality” of the new that matters, not the new as such, and the exploration of this distinction in actual practice is, in my view, the real work of education. Again I am curious to know whether Oliverio would argue that there is also a specific task for philosophy *of education* in this regard, or whether he would agree that this is the proper work of education-without-philosophy

While I think, therefore, that Oliverio has made a really fascinating contribution to our understanding of the relationship of, and difference between, philosophy and education, there are still further questions about what such an exploration means for the status, and perhaps also for the standing, of philosophy of education.

1. Gert Biesta, “Is Philosophy of Education a Historical Mistake? Connecting Philosophy and Education Differently,” *Theory and Research in Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): 65-76.

2. See, for example, Gert Biesta, “Disciplines and Theory in the Academic Study of Education: A Comparative Analysis of the Anglo-American and Continental Construction of the Field,” *Pedagogy, Culture, and Society* 19, no. 2 (2011): 175-92.

3. John Dewey, “Philosophy of Education,” in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 305, cited in Oliverio, this volume.

4. John Dewey, “Philosophy of Education,” 305-306, cited in Oliverio, this volume.

5. Oliverio, this volume.

6. Oliverio, this volume.

7. Oliverio, this volume.

8. Oliverio, this volume.

9. Oliverio, this volume.