

‘Why Do I Need to Go to School?’

A plea for secondary school projects on the philosophy of education

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Word count: 1857

1. Introduction

All teachers and parents at some point have had to deal with a child who asked them: ‘Why do I need to go to school?’ As simple as it may sound, this question has always been hard to answer coherently. An unambiguous answer, however, is indispensable, because even we as adults know that nothing is as frustrating as doing something you dislike, without knowing why you are supposed to do it. How then can we expect children to value what goes on in the classroom? If we want them to come to school with an inspired attitude, we should invite them to think with us and see if we can counter their legitimate question with a proper answer.

In this paper, the proposition is put forth that organizing projects on the philosophy of education¹ is a good way of motivating students in secondary schools. First, a clarification of the term ‘education’ is given. Second, three specific arguments are discussed as to why we should educate students about education. Third, a brief example is given of what a lesson on the philosophy of education might look like. Finally, we will look at why the proposition of this paper is relevant for the present state of affairs with regards to education in Belgium.

2. What is education?

Why do governments force parents to send their children to school? Some intuitive answers are that going to school is important because children need education in order to get a decent job when they are older, or because they need to learn how to interact with other children, or because they need to learn what non-parental authority is. Sure, but why then do all children need to study facts of, say, history or geography, while most will never use them later in life?

¹ ‘Philosophy of education’ is meant to include the history of education. Therefore, in case of lack of space in the curriculum, a project on the philosophy of education may well be part of a regular history course.

There is of course much more at stake than mere employment and social skills. For Werner Jaeger, ‘education in any human community (...) is the direct expression of its active awareness of a standard’.² R.S. Peters writes that ‘children, to a large extent, are indifferent to all that constitutes being civilised. They start off in the position of the barbarian outside the gates. The problem is to get them inside the citadel of civilisation’.³ Schooling plays a crucial role in this regard. Peters and P.H. Hirst define education as ‘initiation into a form of life’⁴, a term also adopted by David Carr, who writes that through education, children undergo ‘normative initiation into socially constructed rules, principles and values’.⁵ Put simply, parents want their children to go to school because they themselves went to school, and their parents, and their grandparents and so on. School is mandatory because we want children to be civilised and normal like everyone else, to become part of a lifeform which ‘took our remote ancestors centuries to develop’.⁶ Western education goes back all the way to the *paideia*⁷ and was passed on to the Romans with the *artes liberales*, to the medieval liberal arts, and onwards to the Enlightenment-ideal of *Bildung*.⁸ At the turn of the nineteenth century, ‘with the coming of industrialism (...) and the increasing demand for knowledge and skill consequent on it, ‘education’ became more increasingly associated with ‘schooling’’.⁹ Nowadays, Western education is often referred to as ‘liberal education’¹⁰, and is still rooted in the ideal of the *paideia*. According to Jaeger, modern education ‘needs illumination and transformation by [the Greek] ideal, in order to establish its true meaning and direction’.¹¹

3. Why should we teach the philosophy of education?

If all this historical context is available to us, why should we not share it with our students? After all, it is directly related to their lives as much as it is to ours. Projects on the philosophy of education would be a good way to establish this. Let us look at three more concrete arguments for organizing such projects.

² Jaeger 1946, p.xiv.

³ Peters 1963, pp.72-73.

⁴ Peters and Hirst 1970, p.20.

⁵ Carr 2003, p.132.

⁶ Peters 1963, p.69.

⁷ *παιδεία*, ‘rearing of a child’

⁸ Cuypers 2018, p.644.

⁹ Peters and Hirst 1970, p.23.

¹⁰ Cuypers 2018, p.643.

¹¹ Jaeger 1946, pp.xvii-xviii.

First, adopting a more formal method, if we look at a conceptual analysis of what constitutes an educated person, it becomes clear that a certain degree of reflexion on the value of education is a substantial component of what makes one educated:

‘S is an educated person if and only if

- (1) S is in a desirable state of mind which is realized in a morally unobjectionable manner and (partly) produced by S’s voluntary intentional action; and
- (2) S possesses ‘knowledge that’ and understanding of the ‘reason why’ which are produced by S’s learning processes (partly) assisted by educational processes; in addition,
 - (2a) S must take delight in knowledge and understanding for their own sake and must care about their standards of excellence;
 - (2b) S’s knowledge and understanding must be (sufficiently) all-round and versatile; and
 - (2c) S’s knowledge and understanding must (sufficiently) actively transform S’s attitude to life and the world.’¹²

Starting with criterion (1), this ‘desirable state of mind’ undeniably involves appreciation for the value of education. If a teacher succeeds in initiating a student into our form of life, albeit without convincing her of the importance of this process, we feel that he really has not succeeded at all. With regards to criteria (2a-c), which ‘qualify the type of knowledge and understanding required for being educated’¹³, it is imperative that the student is well-informed about the use of being educated to take delight in knowledge for her own sake. Also, we may wonder if she will want to allow her knowledge to actively transform her attitude to life and the world, if she does not have a clear idea about why she should do so.

Secondly, Peters writes that at ‘the culminating stages of education there is little distinction between teacher and taught; they are both participating in the shared experience of exploring a common world’.¹⁴ Delightful as this sounds, we may wonder whether a student will even wish to participate in such an experience, if she has never been informed about why it is valuable in the first place. The teacher ought to explain to her that ‘there can be no experience or knowledge without the acquisition of the relevant concepts’¹⁵, and that, as cognitive psychologist Daniel T. Willingham puts it, ‘when it comes to knowledge, those who have more gain more’.¹⁶ Teachers should explicitly communicate to students that learning is a cumulative process, and that the more you do of it, the easier it gets.

¹² Cuypers 2018, p.640.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Peters 1963, p.71.

¹⁵ Peters and Hirst 1970, p.62.

¹⁶ Willingham 2009, p.42.

Finally, Willingham writes that ‘things that create an emotional reaction will be better remembered’.¹⁷ Now, a good teacher ‘must have views about what are good or bad forms of development’¹⁸ and ‘has perhaps a love of truth, a passion for justice, and a hatred of what is tasteless. To ask him what the aim or point of this form of life is, into which he has himself been initiated, seems an otiose question’.¹⁹ To convince students of the importance of education requires a zealous teacher who manages to relate to his students on an emotional level and gets them to think about these issues as earnestly and passionately as he himself does. A philosophy project taught by such a teacher would create space and time in the curriculum for this specific purpose.

4. How should we teach the philosophy of education?

We will now briefly look at one tangible example of how the philosophy of education may be taught in secondary schools. One way to make students aware of the ubiquitous influence that education has on their lives, is by confronting them with the complete opposite, e.g. a wolf-child such as Victor of Aveyron, as portrayed in François Truffaut’s film *L’Enfant Sauvage* (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The teacher starts class by drawing a web diagram about education on the board, allowing the students to come up with relevant vocabulary. He then distributes a hand-out with Fig. 1 and 2 on it and asks the students to discuss in pairs the differences between these forms of life, or to write a text about which life they would prefer, or something in that vein. Over the following days/weeks, the teacher describes the history of education and thus clarifies how human beings

¹⁷ Ibid., p.58.

¹⁸ Peters and Hirst 1970, p.29.

¹⁹ Peters 1963, p.72.

went from the situation in Fig. 1 to that in Fig. 2. Such exercises would allow students to reflect and philosophize on what it means to be ‘educated’ and ‘civilized’.

5. Conclusion

Jaeger writes that for the Greeks, education entailed no less than ‘the creation of a higher type of man’ and ‘the purpose of all human effort’. He goes on to state that ‘the law and the prophets of the Israelites, the Confucian system of the Chinese, the Dharma of the Indians are in their whole intellectual structure fundamentally and essentially different from the Greek ideal of culture’, and that, as already cited above, ‘the culture of the present (...) needs illumination and transformation by this ideal, in order to establish its true meaning and direction’.²⁰ That is, if liberal education is still deeply rooted in the ideals of the *paideia*, and if these ideals are so typical of our Western form of life, then we should acknowledge this and take it into consideration when thinking about the future of liberal education.

However, the purely economic mindset with which most curricula are designed nowadays seems to indicate that the opposite is happening. Flemish Minister of Education Ben Weyts states on his website that ‘children are Flanders’ capital. If we succeed in making our children excel, our capital will grow’.²¹ Instead of regarding education as ‘the creation of a higher type of man’, it is now seen as a means to make adolescents fit for the job market as soon as possible. Over the past decades, the emphasis has shifted more and more from the value of knowledge to digital skills, pragmatic competences, comprehension strategies and functional language use, while it has been proven that ‘the process we most hope to engender in our students – thinking critically and logically – are not possible without background knowledge’.²² Students often wonder why they need to learn all those seemingly worthless facts of history, biology, grammar and geology by heart, and teachers often fail to provide them with an appropriate answer. A project on the philosophy of education will (re)confirm the primary importance of knowledge, motivating students to gain more of it and become better learners.

If explaining the importance of table manners to a child over dinner is a natural thing to do, then so is teaching the value of education in secondary schools. As such, the school as an institution would, as it were, break the fourth wall and make explicit to all students that ‘education can have no ends beyond itself’ and that ‘to be educated is not to have arrived at a

²⁰ Jaeger 1946, pp.xvii-xviii.

²¹ <https://www.benweyts.be/onderwerpen/onderwijs>

²² Willingham 2009, p.37.

destination [but] to travel with a different view'.²³ If we want students to see the value of education, we must explain it to them, and tell them about the historical and philosophical reasons for coming to school. Raising the bar and assuming that students are smart enough to grasp such issues seems a good start.

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²³ Peters 1963, p.74.