Book Review

*Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice*

Dale T. Snauwaert


*Ethical Visions of Education* is an insightful and powerful collection of essays exploring the philosophy of education of ten prominent world educators, including John Dewey, Paulo Freire, W. E. B. Du Bois, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, Jane Addams, Tao Xingzhi, Maria Montessori, Rabindranath Tagore, Rudolf Steiner, and Albert Schweitzer. The book provides an in-depth exploration of arguably the greatest educators and educational philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a wonderful resource in two ways: First, each chapter makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the educational thought and practice of the featured educators and philosophers. Second, what is even more powerful than the clear and thoughtful articulation and analysis of the particular philosophies of education explored in the book is the overall philosophical framework.

The basic premise of the book, as articulated by David Hansen in the introduction, is that the work of philosophy concerns the development of “generative ideas,” and thus philosophy of education pertains to the development of generative educational ideas. Hansen forcefully argues that ideas, being distinct from facts and information, constitute attempts by individuals to articulate the meaning of their experiences. Ideas in this sense cannot be transmitted from one person to another; they emerge from individuals’ reflections on their own unique experiences. In addition, ideas move and transform us; they have generative power. In this sense, ideas have consequences; they matter, and therefore, they have moral import. Philosophy is understood here, not as the production of theory per se (theory defined as modes of explanation of phenomena), but as the pursuit of ideas so defined—philosophy
speaks not merely to theory but to our commitments to live in a certain way in the world. Philosophy is a way of life and thus possesses a profound ethical core as well as vision. This approach to philosophy constitutes a return to its original meaning. As Pierre Hadot has demonstrated, for the Greeks and Romans, philosophy did not primarily concern the construction of abstract theoretical systems; philosophy was instead conceived as a choice of a way of life, a justification for that choice, and the articulation of the path or curriculum leading to the realization of the ideals of that way of life. The focus of philosophy and education was the transformation of one’s life as a mode of Being. As a path philosophy included sets of exercises necessary for the transformation of one’s being in accordance with the vision of the philosophy. Schools were formed out of the chosen way of life of the philosophy and those attracted to the philosophy. In these schools the way of life defined by the philosophy and the understandings and exercises necessary to live that life were developed, taught, and experienced.1

Such a perspective on philosophy as a way of life based in the ethical vision of generative ideas is essential for every educator. So conceived, there is no one best philosophical system for education, but a plurality of educational ideas in dynamic conversation. This point suggests the fundamental importance for educators to dialogically encounter a variety of educational philosophies as a stimulus for the generation of their own educational ideas upon which the dynamism of their practice is based.

Each chapter of Ethical Visions of Education illustrates the power of ideas in this sense. The book embodies and manifests its own main premise. Each of the philosophies articulated in the volume is a unique example of the generative power of educational ideas. It offers an opportunity to dialogically encounter a rich set of educational ideas, and their concomitant practices, generated in response to the direct experience of a diversity of historical, cultural, and political conditions—the response of arguably the most visionary educators of the last one hundred and fifty years.

In terms of the specific chapters, David Hansen explores John Dewey’s conception of education for deepening meaning, for leading a meaningful life. Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy articulate Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy for liberation and its intellectual and experiential sources. Rodino Anderson conveys the power of W. E. B. Du Bois’s idea of a liberal education for moral, political, and spiritual freedom. Andrew Gebert and Monte Joffe explore Tsunesaburo Makiguchi’s conception of education and life as the pursuit and creation of value. Makiguchi is the Japanese founder of Soka Education and Soka Gakkai (of which the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century is a member). Charlene Haddock Seigfried presents the moving work of Jane Addams and her conception of education through experience and conversation for democracy and social justice. Wang Weijia and Zhang Kaiyuan discuss the important work of the famous Chinese educator and tireless advocate of public education, Tao Xingzhi, who posits a philosophy of the integration of education with life as a means for the cultivation of the New Person of
truth, kindness, and beauty. Jacqueline Cossentino and Jennifer Whitcomb articulate Maria Montessori’s education for peace through the cultivation of humanity. Kathleen O’Connell presents Rabindranath Tagore’s (Noble Laureate for Literature) idea of an education for freedom, creativity, and global interconnectivity, highlighting the importance of creativity in education and life. P. Bruce Uhrmacher analyzes the holistic and spiritual philosophy of education of Rudolf Steiner and its implementation in Waldorf schools. A. G. Rud explores Albert Schweitzer’s attempt to live in accordance with the Principle of Reverence for Life and its formative implications for education.

Overall, this collection of essays is a dynamic, inspiring exploration of educational philosophy. It inspires the reader to pursue an in-depth study of each of the featured educators. It is the kind of book and a kind of approach to philosophy that the field of education in general, and the field of philosophy of education in particular, needs. I highly recommend it and wish it a wide readership. It will be required reading in my philosophy of education course.

Note


Dale T. Snauwaert is Associate Professor of Philosophy of Education and Director, Center for Nonviolence and Democratic Education at the University of Toledo. Email: dale.snauwaert@utoledo.edu