



Ethical Knowledge and Teacher Training

Savoir éthique et formation des enseignants

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Relating the demands of the educational rationality to a triadic conception of ethics, simultaneously teleological, deontological and pragmatic, this article reflects on the importance of the teacher's ethical knowledge, here valued as primary and substantive element of their «professional face».

Keywords: *Ethics, hospitality, education, prudential reason.*

Relativement aux demandes de la rationalité éducationnelle à une conception triadique de l'éthique simultanément téléologique, déontologique et pragmatique, cet article réfléchit sur l'importance du savoir éthique des enseignants, ici valorisée comme un élément primaire et substantif de leur «profil professionnel»

Mots-Clés: *Éthique, hospitalité, éducation, raison prudentielle.*

Introduction

Either in its academic or social dimension, the educational action refers to a human relationship practice, to a «face to face» encounter, according to Levinas. Providing that welcome the other's face represents the fundamental anthropological event

allowing us to understand the secret of time fecundity¹, we place the intersubjective relation at the heart of all educational dynamics, since this is a particularly demanding ethical requirement within the school education, where the personal and physical presence of the teacher is vital.

In this sense, the concept of hospitality is a structuring principle of all pedagogical work and, therefore, a founding value of teaching, an experience of sensitivity, acceptance, authority and responsibility. The professional teacher knowledge is, in this context, a practice wisdom of a highly prudential nature, appealing to the domain of reflection and deliberation skills that are specific and particularly demanding both ethically and morally.

In this understanding, it is particularly relevant to have teacher-training programs consistently aligned with the principles of an educational ethics indexed to values of alterity and oriented towards the

¹Lévinas, E., *Totalidade e Infinito*, trans by Reibeiro, J., P., Lisboa: Edições 70, 1988, & Lévinas, E., *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1990.

acquisition of competences, theoretical and practical, which can improve a professional conduct sensitive, autonomous and reflective.

The practice of teaching as hospitality

Education is an anthropological practice of key importance in human development processes, as recognized by the democratic societies of the 21st century, that choose education as a basic common good and as an inalienable human right. In this context, according to the imperatives of universalization of this fundamental right, students attend school education by legal obligation rather than by invitation. To what extent then makes sense to associate the idea of hospitality with the ideas of education, school, pedagogy and teaching?

Indeed, in the school - the institutional place of reference of the teaching exercise - students are welcomed in their capacity as training subjects and not as simple voluntary or occasional visitors. In this sense, and no matter how inclusive school should be today, it is crucial not to confuse its mission with the social purposes that belong to other institutions. That is, when we speak of educational hospitality, referring to the universe of school culture, it is above all an essentially anthropoetic sense, associated with the relationship of teaching as a face-to-face relationship, which we would like to emphasize.

The face means the expression of the human uniqueness par excellence, a meaning enigmatic and decontextualized, before which the subject is in the situation of receiving and welcoming, long before owning or understanding. Hereafter, according to

Derrida², from the moment we contact with others' face, that we speak and listen to him, the dimension of respect is open. A respect that cannot be held captive to any circumstantial appreciation or classification, and that should be lived as unconditional respect for the other in its irreducible condition of another.

Thus, hospitality is a fundamental feature of subjectivity, allowing us to show its vocation as a learner, its vocation for transcendence or the idea of infinity. In the words of Lévinas³, the relation of the Same with the Other, without the transcendence of the relationship cutting the bonds that a relationship implies, is fixed in the situation described by Descartes in which the I think maintains with the Infinite a relation called idea of infinity.

In this context, the access to the face, especially when it has a pedagogical intentionality, requires a particularly sensitive, warm and careful attention. According to Lévinas, the attention to something is, primarily, attention to someone, which is why the first teaching lies in teacher's own presence. The way the teacher presents, how it welcomes the student, how he listens to him and how he talks to him, makes all the difference in the act of teaching. Thus, the teacher can be seen as a host, exercising pedagogical mastery as a kind of «invitation art». However, this doesn't mean that the student can be treated as a simple «guest», as it happens in the domestic or tourist hospitality.

² Derrida, J., «Une Hospitalité à L'Infini» in: Sefahi, M., (dir.), *Manifeste pour L'Hospitalité*, Grigny: Paroles de L'Aube, 1999, p. 67.

³ Lévinas, E., *Totalidade e Infinito*, op.cit., p. 35.

Although all teaching practice requires a sensitive, warm and careful attention, educational hospitality is not only aimed at, or fundamentally, to ensure the well-being and satisfaction of the guest. On the contrary. This is an intentional activity aimed at promoting the autonomous, free and responsible achievement of each student in a framework of multiple and successful learning. However, there is no meaningful learning without experience of restlessness and discomfort. The relationship with the other and the inherent assumption of alterity as a strand of identity entail unavoidable doses of reflexive suffering. In its capacity as a learner, each subject has to assume himself as a core of a division, of a fracture that, without prejudice to sometimes being felt as a threat of the other - outside of me or in me over me - must be seen as necessary and, ultimately, as gratifying⁴.

This traumatological sense linked to the experience of alterity is one of the fundamental features of pedagogical intentionality. The art of teaching is, precisely, to know how to encourage processes of subjective rupture which lead to an increasing capacity for personal and social autonomy. It is up to the educator to motivate and nurture the relationship previously described as idea of infinity, the connexion with realities never possessed, known or imagined. Only then will the students be able to receive and producing alterity, claiming their own power of authorship and transcendence.

⁴ Carvalho, A., D.,- Baptista, I., «Ética e Formação Profissional, problemáticas antropológicas e dilemas éticos na intervenção socioeducativa» in: Banks, S., - Nohr, K., (Coord.), *Ética Prática para as Profissões do Trabalho Social*, Porto: Porto Editora, 2008, p. 28.

In this understanding, the imperatives of a friendly welcome and pedagogical intervention are complementary⁵. It all depends on the mastery of the educator, that is, on how he knows how to conduct the educational process, turning the obligation of attending school into a personal invitation to learn. It is important to highlight the fact that the pedagogical art, or the art of invitation, must not be confused or confined to the traditional strategies of reception and host. The whole journey of overcoming oneself requires an unceasing and tenacious work that forces and moves beyond the strategies of mere motivation.

Specifically in the context of school education, the challenge involves a lucid and patient work with each student, leading him to move from word to word, from sentence to sentence, from problem to problem in a world of relationships and lessons. The time of pedagogy is «a time with time», a time to discover, to think, to listen and to be listened to⁶. A time of authority hostile to any exercise of domestication or domination and, as such, appeals to the ethical wisdom of teachers.

Ethical Knowledge and Prudential Reason

Following what has been said, which allows us to describe teaching as an experience of hospitality, we recall with Jacques Derrida⁷ that, by definition, hospitality does not have a defined *topos*, being in a

⁵ Prairat, E., *De La Déontologie Enseignante*, Paris: PUF, 2005, p. 51.

⁶ Baptista, I., *Dar rosto ao futuro, a educação como compromisso ético*, Porto: Profedições, 2005, p. 63.

⁷ Derrida, J., *Adieu*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1997 & Derrida, J., «Une Hospitalité à L'Infini», *op.cit.*

permanent tension between ethical unconditionality and temporal conditionality. It is precisely here that lies the unstable character - aesthetic and political - of the teaching activity, justifying the development of ethical knowledge categories that force us to go beyond the realm of technical and scientific validation.

Here, ethical knowledge is seen as the personal and professional capacity that impels each subject to examine their own conduct, questioning intentions and actions⁸. Ultimately, this allows us to identify the teachers' ethical knowledge with pedagogy itself, as a practical rationality or prudential rationality, in the Aristotelian sense. According to Aristotle, the excellence of practical thinking lies in *phronesis*, a concept comparable to what in the Latin tradition is called *prudence* and referring to the virtues of a good deliberation, that is, a deliberation made *in situ*, based on the articulation between principles, purposes, values and norms.

Regardless the reasons concerning the etymological affinity or the ambiguity that tends to characterize its current use, from a conceptual point of view we choose to include the terms «ethics», «moral» and «deontology» in a perspective of distinction and complementarity. Thus, we consider that the debate on the foundations and objectives of the action is inseparable from the affirmation of a «good will» or rational will, according to the Kantian perspective. On the other hand, as Paul Ricoeur argues, the «aporias

of duty» create practical obstacles that lead to morality as a limited, though legitimate and even indispensable, accomplishment, and ethics in this sense would involve moral⁹.

The assertion of prudential teacher wisdom or ethical knowledge lies in the way in which the difficult and paradoxical path between the different perspectives of rational articulation that Ricoeur speaks of is made. This justifies the choice for an idea of educational and professional ethics simultaneously teleological, deontological and pragmatic, in accordance with the aporetic character of teaching.

The educational relation requires the «face host», the radically singular expression, and not a generalized and abstract hospitality. It happens, however, that this hospitality takes place in school, in an institutional place, calling principles of justice and equity that, by definition, include a comparison between incomparable things. On the other hand, we say that the teacher works as a «representative and responsible person»¹⁰. Once again, this represents an aporetic situation, as it is necessary that the duty of advance and transmission coexist with the obligation to update, renew and reinvent the world.

In the course of their professional practice, teachers have practical bottlenecks, with problems and dilemmas that require the exercise of a practical wisdom that is both reflexive and prudential. Ideals, values and standards of conduct are tested daily, in

⁸ Campbell, E., «Teacher Education as Missed Opportunity in the Professional Preparation of Ethical Practitioners», in: Bondi, L., & al (org.) *Towards Professional Wisdom*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011, p. 82 (pp. 81-94).

⁹ Ricoeur, P., *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris: Seuil, 1990, p. 201.

¹⁰ Arendt, H., et al., *Quatro textos Excêntricos*, trans. By Pombo, O., Lisboa: Relógio D'Água, 2000, p. 43.

the face of complex and particularly dense educational situations, appealing to the decision-making power of the actors. According to Adalberto Dias de Carvalho¹¹, teachers are often confronted with «extreme circumstances» and have to deal with human affairs that require critical readings served by «dense and contradictory ideas». Served, therefore, by an open-minded, problematizing thought, which must be sustained in an ethical formation consistent with the requirements of practical wisdom.

Ethical Training Requirements

These arguments lead us to the need for an ethical training of teachers, within the framework of developing and valuing their professional ethos. As has been said, professional teacher knowledge requires a mastery of scientific, technical, but also, or essentially, ethical and aesthetic competences. Therefore, in line with the stated conceptions of education, teaching and educational ethics, we point three vectors of nuclear formation: philosophical foundations of education, educational axiologies and practical deliberation.

The first concerns the essential reference to a universe of anthropological and epistemological basis of education, emphasizing the indispensable place of Philosophy within the educational knowledge. We believe that the demand for critical radicalism underlying philosophical rationality plays a crucial role in the teachers training process. As human professionals, educators should be able to position

themselves critically in relation to different conceptions of humanity and to different educational paradigms. This explains the extension of the etymological meaning of ethics, understanding that, more than a kind of second nature or «secondary layer»¹², linked to ways of acting or inhabiting the world, ethics corresponds, above all, to a requirement of reflexivity that precedes, bases and encompasses morality.

However, at the same time, the need for historical inscription of this reflexivity demands an imperative dimension, the indispensable path through the sieve of the norm, as Ricoeur argues. This justifies a second set of training linked to the educational axiologies, to a knowledge based on the values, duties and standards of conduct assumed in the social, institutional and professional communities. Nevertheless, as said before, it is on a practical level and in the face of very concrete educational situations that the ethical knowledge of teachers is tested, requiring specific skills of practical thinking. Recalling that we speak of skills considered inherent to teaching and not the skills that may eventually enable them to manage exceptional situations, problems or punctual crises. It is, therefore, to promote the capacity of deliberation and decision of each teacher.

When we emphasize the educational hospitality on the teacher, as a welcoming subject, we have rightly appealed to an open, sensitive and reflective teaching identity. Identity, individual or collective, can be defined as an outward movement, as desire for otherness or hunger for infinity. To this extent, it is

¹¹ Carvalho, A., D., *A Contemporaneidade como Utopia*, Porto: Afrontamento, 2000, p. 94.

¹² Lévinas, E., *Totalidade e Infinito*, op.cit., p. 69.

also defined as a movement within. A movement which, as Lévinas has shown, is awakened and activated in a very special way when, faced with another freedom, the subject is confronted with the witness of human alterity, that is, with something radically mysterious and impossible to convert into simple content of consciousness. The changes produced at the level of self-understanding by this subjective trauma are, in fact, the true motor of reflexivity and creativity. Therefore, the ethical training of teachers is indissociable from the requirement of self-training and self-questioning from the practice of self-hospitality.

«The preparation of man, whether for his inevitable relation to suffering or for the enjoyment of happiness, depends on his capacity to think and to live - between frustration and hope - the limits of limit situations»¹³. In fact, the freest and most welcoming people are those who have a good relationship with their «inner society»¹⁴, which means to concede that educators who dialogue healthily with their own inner world are in a stronger position to respect the requests that come from the testimony of the interiority of another. Only then will be able to «giving place» but also to «building a place», becoming reflective actors and, as such, as true authors.

Conclusion

As stated before, the dimensions of ethics and morality are inherent to teaching as a practice of hospitality. In this sense and identifying the ethical

knowledge of teachers with a knowledge of prudential nature, we believe that the reference to a suitably sustained and explicit axiological framework, as well as the definition of standards of professional conduct, constitute a fundamental but not adequate support, for the enlightened and autonomous action of each teacher. It is therefore essential to encourage skills developed through specific training processes, both in the context of academic training and vocational training, in the context of early and continuing training.

Nevertheless, the strength of the ethical component as a substantial part of the professional teaching knowledge, has not found a consistent and adequate translation in higher education, namely in the training courses for teaching where, in our perspective and for the reasons that have been exposed, should assume curricular relevance.

On the other hand, recognizing ethical reflexivity as a preliminary and inner condition for teaching implies thinking about teachers' face condition, calling for dimensions of subjectivity, dignity and personal commitment that are inalienable. Recalling the assumptions underlying the Levinasian argument, we must remember, however, that the meaning of the face transcends the effects of social visibility linked to any circumstantial attribute. As such, we speak of the professional face of the teachers and, therefore, of the face of the teaching itself, referring to the expression of a singular professional authority, of an ethos, unbending to the public image.

It is precisely in a perspective of affirmation of this essential meaning that we place the requirements of

¹³ Carvalho, A., D., *A Contemporaneidade como Utopia*, op.cit., p. 94.

¹⁴ Derrida, J., «Une Hospitalité à L'Infini», op.cit., p. 139.

ethical formation. To a large extent, ethical assets and virtues of character cannot be taught through practices of communication and instruction, but they can be stimulated and worked within the framework of formative processes consistent with an educationally demanding ethos guided by values of hospitality and responsibility.

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