

School and the Limits of Philosophy

PETER FITZSIMONS

Education & Management Services (NZ) Ltd.

Abstract:

Philosophy and schools, children and dynamite, elephants and postage stamps – each has a place, but not necessarily in any natural combination with the other. Whether schools and philosophy belong together depends largely on what we mean by both. To the extent that schools are instruments of government regulation and a mechanism for production of economic subjectivity, philosophy might be welcome as an ancillary technique for enhancing problem-solving skills or helping students to think more logically. If, on the other hand, teachers are concerned to promote education as the development of independent thought beyond the realm of instrumental utility, then philosophy is a vital, and potentially critical, engagement with power, with the way schools function, and more generally with society and its government.

With reference to some recent policy moves in education, this paper argues that the focus on the economic productivity of education is intensifying, and that as educational institutions become more heavily regulated and monitored, there is little provision for, or toleration of, any form of structural criticism, philosophical or otherwise. The conclusion is that philosophy may have an explicit place within the existing school programmes, but that any philosophy which provides a basis for fundamental change in our patterns and expectations of schooling is likely to be undermined. Commitment to critical philosophy becomes, then, a surreptitious activity on the part of individual teachers, operating outside the official curriculum and frustrated by increasing surveillance and demands for accountability.

Introduction

The word *philosophy* has become part of our everyday conversation. Some institutions, schools among them, are said to have a particular philosophy, meaning they are driven by a particular doctrine or system of beliefs accepted as authoritative within that institution. More generally, a *philosophy* might refer to a personal belief about how to live or how to deal with a situation – as in ‘my philosophy is to let sleeping dogs lie’. The Concise Oxford Dictionary reflects this variety of meanings, listing philosophy as including the use of reason and argument in seeking truth and knowledge of reality; and alternatively, as a personal rule of life or as advanced learning in general. To be ‘philosophical’ is to be wise, serene, temperate, and calm in adverse circumstances. There is hope for us yet.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy notes that what has been called philosophy has changed radically in scope over the course of history. The shortest definition provided is that philosophy is ‘thinking about thinking’, emphasising the second-order character of philosophy as reflective thought about particular kinds of thinking, beliefs and knowledge about the world or large parts of it. The same volume provides an extended definition, which is more detailed but represented as still ‘uncontroversially comprehensive’:

Philosophy is rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value) (Quinton, 1995, p. 666).

We talk about Greek philosophy, Kantian philosophy and Enlightenment philosophy. We have constructions such as: critical philosophy, speculative philosophy, political philosophy, continental philosophy and Eastern philosophy. The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy has entries on the philosophy of all manner of things, including art, science, mathematics, economics, education, history, law, literature, linguistics, religion, and social sciences, each with its own distinctive characteristics. We have philosophy of biology, philosophy of

mind, and even philosophy about philosophy with such things as the philosophy of logic. It is a challenge then to work out what it is we are talking about when we refer to philosophy and schools. Neither this paper, nor the schools to which it refers, can possibly encompass the full complexity of what is called philosophy.

For the purposes of containment, then, this paper will restrict its focus to (a) the deliberate introduction of philosophical content into school programmes, (b) the adoption of philosophical approaches to existing school curricula, and (c) the potential for philosophy to question the appropriation of the purposes and function of schools for political and economic ends. This last inclusion constitutes the thrust of this paper: a call for critical engagement with various policy directions and legislative requirements that regulate participation in educational relationships. With similar self determination, the paper will expand the definition of schools to encompass a range of institutions generally considered to be educational, but which, it is argued, serve other purposes and functions in our society.

Schools are constrained

Schools, by their nature and in their *raison d'être*, are constrained. Even at the linguistic level, the word 'school' has a number of nuances that go beyond simple reference to a building for educational engagement. A school of thought is a collection or group of people who share common characteristics of opinion or outlook, perhaps in terms of discipline, philosophy or belief. A school can also be a body of fish all swimming in the same direction. An individual who doesn't fit the pattern might be seen as failing to fit within that school. In addition, the process of *schooling* implies instruction or training rather than free exploration or engaging in personal pursuits. Further, our schools are explicitly designed for the intentional education of young people, as a form of enculturation, socialisation, and inculcation into the disciplined forms of thought that characterise Western knowledge production. Schooling in the broad sense (here including university education) is needed to extend and refine knowledge for a skilled workforce and ongoing research and development in a modern economy. A less explicit, but just as vital role, is the custodial function that schools serve, assembling and occupying vast numbers of young people in such a way that a teaching profession is kept employed, parents are liberated from child-minding and able to compete with the unemployed for jobs in the market place, and the students themselves are assessed and credentialled to legitimate certain forms of socio-economic stratification and privilege. Our educational institutions, then, are focal points for the insertion of government policy, nodules in the networks of social and cultural subjectivity.

Because they are intricately interwoven with economic productivity, and because they are powerful mechanisms in the production of subjectivity, schools are characterised by a formal structure, within a disciplined ethos of accountability, and aligned with the vision of government – at both the macro and micro level, from the length and timing of a school year to the number of hours in a day; from the style and content of the curriculum to the mechanisms for its delivery; and from the physical environment of the school buildings to the monitoring of compulsory attendance¹. Given the level of surveillance and external control of schools, it is not surprising to find a considerable degree of similarity across schools in both their programmes and their political acquiescence. Contributing to their homogeneity, a number of purportedly educational initiatives are now outlined – initiatives that reduce diversity and intensify compliance with government agendas, with nary a philosophical consideration in sight.

Recent education policy

In accord with broader policy directions, the Ministry of Education is intent upon accelerating academic achievement, promoting outputs that are measurable in terms of human capital, and disabling as far as acceptable any behaviour that disrupts the management of such a mission. Such a focus is quite technicist, with little need for distractions like critical analysis – philosophical or otherwise. For teachers or students to question such policy is easily and usually construed as negative or cynical resistance, detracting from their effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes.

Proud of its achievements, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2010a) website specifies some ‘ongoing initiatives’ spanning early childhood, primary, intermediate and secondary education. These initiatives are ‘designed to produce a high-income, knowledge-based economy that includes all New Zealanders’. Current initiatives focus sector-wide on truancy, pastoral care, professional development, raising achievement, personalised learning and collaboration between agencies.

This list of such initiatives is rather limited, technicist rather than philosophical in nature, and clearly designed to support an agenda of economic productivity. There is a focus on strengthening student achievement, and on the promotion of national standards in literacy and numeracy (reading, writing, and mathematics) – by being clear about what students should achieve and by when. There are national standards for Māori as well, and a focus on ‘positive behaviour for learning’. Significant space is also dedicated to the National Digital Strategy and ensuring that schools are ready for ultra-fast broadband when it becomes available. No philosophy, though.

National Standards for children

National Standards have been implemented in primary and intermediate schools across New Zealand this year. These are intended to rank all children above, below, or well-below, benchmarks in reading, writing and maths. Schools are to set achievement targets in their charters next year, and begin submitting data to the Ministry in 2012, on levels of achievement against those targets. There has been considerable resistance to the introduction of the new standards, aimed at both the standards themselves and against the rushed process of their introduction. One of the concerns is that the country is headed towards national league tables that rank schools according to assessment of the standards. The Principals’ Federation is canvassing for money for an information campaign against the standards. The Auckland Primary Principals Association has already pledged \$60,000 towards the campaign to put the Standards on hold.

Minister of Education, Anne Tolley has called the resistance a ‘silly political game’, and criticised the Principals’ Association for bringing ‘nothing positive to the table’: ‘I can only conclude this is about egos, and nothing to do with lifting achievement for our children,’ Tolley is reported as saying (Hartvelt, 2010). The Minister also removed from the Parliament website, a Parliamentary Library research paper released in June this year, although it subsequently appeared for a short time in the Google cache. Mrs Tolley said the paper was “unprofessional”, “highly political” and so biased it could have been written by the union opposing the policy’ (Young, 2010). In the paper, research analyst, Charlotte Oakley (2010) examines the introduction of the Standards, sympathetic to the view of the resisters – in terms of schools having been given insufficient time and professional development to become familiar with the Standards, to develop effective moderation processes, or to trial the standards to determine whether they have been set at the correct level. She signals potential motivation problems for students who don’t achieve the Standards, and argues that it is teaching and learning, rather than the Standards themselves, that raise achievement levels. This, she says, may not be adequately provided for under the Standards. Some interesting conversations have arisen in online blogs about the Minister’s actions in removing the paper, notably one headed, ‘The paper that Anne Tolley Censored’ (R0b, 2010). Not much philosophy here, either.

... and for teachers?

Hartvelt’s newspaper article also reports Auckland University professor, John Hattie, as wanting a similar set of standards to apply to teachers, with a group of ‘experts’ in charge of monitoring them. His concern is that teachers are currently allowed to do ‘anything they want, as long as it’s not harmful’ (Hartvelt, 2010). He is concerned about the failure of the Teachers Council to set minimum standards for teachers, despite having received about 1,000 complaints about teacher behaviour and competency, and having deregistered over a hundred teachers, banning them from the profession. Hattie supports minimum standards to keep undesirables out of the profession, but says it is just as important to focus on excellence and effective performance. Again, there is no philosophical discourse surrounding this issue, and Hattie is one of chosen

few in her *Independent Advisory Group for National Standards* to advise on aspects of the implementation of the National Standards policy (Ministry of Education, 2010b). The Independent Advisory Group will base this advice on consideration of reports from the Ministry of Education, by considering the work of any sector working groups, and their own knowledge and engagement with the sector. As one chosen for this kind of work, Hattie's call for more panels of experts might possibly be interpreted as a conflict of interest.

A Vision for the teaching profession

Earlier this year, the Minister of Education's workforce advisory group released their report: *A Vision for the Teaching Profession* (Ministry of Education, 2010c). It provides a prescriptive focus on various aspects of teaching, including initial teacher education, supporting new teachers, career paths and leadership development. What stands out in the report is the reductionist focus on teachers' *skills* and *abilities*, a heavy reliance on *standards*, and a sense of locking down the controls on the profession. There is to be 'strengthened initial teacher education' (p. 5), 'compulsory training and development' for principals p.8, and 'robust standards throughout the profession' (p. 15). In true managerialist fashion, there are to be 'high standards of excellence' (p. 7), 'profession-wide recognition of excellence' (p. 16), and 'flexibility for school leaders to reward effective teachers' (p. 15).

Despite the group's recommendation that professional leadership must be 'owned by the profession and distinct from government or industrial bodies' (p. 2), the report advocates 'strengthening the capability and capacity of the New Zealand Teachers Council to take ownership and responsibility for... ethical accountability of teacher and discipline' (p. 17). There are two noteworthy concerns here: first, the Teachers Council is very much a government controlled body; and second, this mention of ethics stems from a concern that 'there are no comprehensive and binding ethical standards required of teachers' (p. 24). One could, at a stretch, claim that we are talking philosophy when we mention ethics, but what is signified is actually compulsory compliance with pre-established rules. No philosophy, then, in the prescribed vision for the teaching profession.

Managing disruptive behaviour

Of growing significance in the education policy arena over recent years is a focus on the management of undesirable behaviour. An ongoing group of so-called experts, the Advisory Group on Conduct Problems, provide advice to Government about the development of programmes and policies to address conduct problems in childhood. The group has now published its second report on the prevention, treatment and management of conduct problems in young people (AGCP, 2009). The focus of this report is on the identification, implementation and evaluation of programmes and interventions for children aged 3-7. The gaze of the advisory group is strongly on psychological, psychiatric and therapeutic programmes as a backing for the authority of regular institutional discipline (school and family). The group recommend close alignment with a 'prevention science paradigm' (AGCP, 2009, p. 9), i.e, an approach based on evidence from the scientific literature, preceded by a pilot research programme, featuring randomised controlled trials, and implementing programmes on a population-wide basis across the entire country. Desirable outcomes of the group's preferred programmes include encouraging parents to seek help and to de-stigmatise treatment seeking, and a reduction in anti-social and problem behaviours in children in both the home and the school.

A similar behaviour-management focus is evident in the *Positive Behaviour for Learning Action Plan*, which despite the 'positive' spin, is clearly billed as a mechanism for the 'management of disruptive behaviour in the education system' (New Zealand Government, 2009). Not much philosophy here, either, especially not of the troublesome kind.

Towards uniformity

This brief overview of a few policy initiatives signals the current direction for education: increasingly standardised as a commodity, pluralism and diversity stifled, and student behaviour normalised under a

strongly regulatory regime. Taken together, we see a convergence among the policies, the programmes and the agencies that deliver them; a convergence structured by, guided by, and increasingly provided by, those Jacques Donzelot (1979) called the ‘psy’ specialists and their apologists in education². Advisory committees for such programmes draw heavily for their composition, their findings, and their recommendations, on proponents of psychology and psychiatry, so there is little interrogation of the terms of reference for such committees and even less criticism of the political agenda of those responsible for establishing such committees in the first place. I refer here to ongoing work in the area of professional development of teachers, national standards, conduct problems, positive behaviour for learning, and positive parenting.

The increasing ‘psy’ focus in education promotes the kind of discipline that Foucault identified in his genealogy of prison practices, through which objective classifications are adopted and accepted, certain knowledge and behaviours normalised, and particular individual identities constructed – the production of what he called ‘docile bodies’:

not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies (Foucault, 1977: 138).

Philosophy has a war on its hands if it is to critically investigate the policy world or introduce an ethical dimension to educational dialogue. Something called ‘philosophy’ might appear within the walls of our educational institutions, but only if doesn’t challenge the status quo. As indicated at the outset of this paper, philosophy is a complex domain, even within the restricted focus of this paper. To explore a little further, I want to look at two perspectives on philosophy in relation to school: the first posits philosophy as a set of reasoned, reasonable, and probably acceptable activities within the school community; the second questions the very structure of that community, and is not likely to be so warmly welcomed. As labels for such perspectives, we might call the first *harmless*, the second *dangerous*.

Philosophy as harmless

Much has been argued about whether philosophy is the domain of a small group of experts, or whether the uninitiated might usefully participate actively and constructively in the discussing philosophical issues of current concern (see, for example, Long, 2005). There are further issues about whether philosophy should be studied for its own sake, or treated more instrumentally as a kind of intellectual tool, to sharpen thinking skills. Both aspects are evident in the Matthew Lipman’s (1976) rationale for promoting philosophy for children (P4C), although his major focus seems to be that it would improve reasoning (Lipman, 1976).

Although various initiatives have involved children in philosophy over the years, Lipman is credited with having developed philosophy for children as a commercial brand (Cohen & Naylor, 2008). His concern was for the teaching of reasoning in a way that might counteract the negative effects of school, nurturing within the classroom the ‘lively curiosity that seems to be an essential part of the child’s natural impulse’ (Lipman, 1976, p. 22). For Lipman, the greatest disappointment of traditional education was its failure to produce people approximating his ideal of reasonableness. Whereas, we might celebrate legendary figures of history who were ‘splendidly capricious and magnificently illogical’, Lipman contends, we can no longer afford the luxury or the costs of unreasonableness. It is now, he says, a case of ‘reason together or die together’ (Lipman, 1988, p. 218).

Acknowledging the range of programmes around the world that bring philosophy and children together, Reed & Johnson (2000) see something unique about P4C programmes: the notion of the educated person as one who can think for herself or himself, along with a general methodology for nurturing that educated person. The same authors suggest that the assumption behind P4C is that getting children to *talk well* is a major step in creating a person who can ‘think well for herself or himself’ (p. 206). By talking well, they mean listening to each other, correcting others and themselves, being sensitive to the nuances of conversation, and searching for appropriate rules and standards for deciding what to say. In terms of general

methodology, one starts from a specifically chosen text that is philosophically rich and interesting, with children's responses to the text forming the agenda for inquiry. Discussions evolve from the children's interests, and it is up to the teacher to seize upon these opportunities and use them as entries into philosophical exploration:

getting as many views on out the table as there are children in the classroom, exposing the children to additional views that have been thought up by philosophers, examining the consequences of holding one view over another, and clarifying the meaning and tune underlying assumptions of each view (Lipman, 1977, p. 225).

Significant among the characteristics of P4C, as explained by Lipman, is the teacher's role as 'a fosterer of inquiry, a facilitator of dialogue, a guarantor of impartiality and an instigator of thinking for oneself' (Lipman, 1994, p. 211). The classroom becomes a 'community of inquiry', with a broader vision of such communities nested within larger communities, and these within larger communities still. The image is an outward ripple effect, with 'individuals committed to self-corrective exploration and creativity' (Lipman, 1988, p.220).

Lipman identifies both a narrower and a broader case for p4c. The narrower case is simply that it makes a 'wholesome contribution to the present curriculum and the classroom', where as the broader justification as a 'heuristic praxis of shared philosophical inquiry' (1988, p. 216). The narrower case is conceded without argument, and can readily be subsumed within existing school pedagogy. It is this second and broader justification that I am more concerned with, particularly the limits to what might be examined in this 'heuristic praxis'. Experiential learning implies some engagement with experience. Where classrooms (and here I include the university environment) have been sanitised and insulated from the political context of education, exploration and investigation is limited. Lipman differentiates between the 'tribal' model of education in which the child is initiated into a culture, and the 'reflective' model which generates a certain subjective distance from that cultural environment. The first provides for the 'assimilation of the child by the culture', whereas the second provides for the 'appropriation of the culture by the child' (Lipman, 1988, p.220). To practice philosophy in ways that leave untouched the cultural and political milieu in which schooling practices and education policy are embedded, seems to me very much the assimilation of the child by the culture. I extend here the notion of the 'child' as a metaphor to encompass the naive educator isolated from the engine room of policy development in his/her thinking about education, and thus sanitised against, and unable to reflect upon, the broader social and political environment that constrains his/her own pedagogical practices and the sort of knowledge that might be considered appropriate in our schools.

Lipman talks further about philosophy as 'the mother of all sciences', generating new ideas in the speculative activity that precedes scientific understandings in new fields of knowledge:

As philosophical speculation becomes more rigorous and substantiated, as measurement and experimentation and verification begin to occur, philosophy turns into science. In this sense, philosophy is a source of ideas that precedes the development of every new scientific enterprise (Lipman, 1977, pp. 224-225).

Philosophy is, he suggests, the discipline that best prepares us to think in terms of the other disciplines, and so must be assigned a central role in the educational process. Philosophers are, he says, 'critics of thinking' (1994, p. 211) in much the same way drama critics are critics of plays and political commentators are critics of policies. It is this role as critics of thinking that I want to amplify here. 'Thinking' doesn't occur in a vacuum – it involves thinking about something. In the case of education, it is acceptable to reflect on various forms of pedagogy, on classroom interactions, on the ways in which prescribed curricula can be re-arranged and learning accelerated. It is less acceptable to think about the global political environment in which such curricula are prescribed, or to investigate the pendulum swings in prescribed curriculum and preferred pedagogy that accompany the changing agendas of various governments. What is clearly lacking in

‘thinking about education’, and equally lacking in the critics of such thinking, i.e., the philosophers, is the rigorous, reasoned analysis of the political backdrop for education policy, the commitment to exposing the ways in which universities are fast relinquishing their role as critic and conscience of society, and the exposition of the way that educational discourse is becoming lop-sided, with psychology as the yardstick for education and the ‘psy’-specialists normalised as the arbiter for all things educational – even the category ‘normal’ itself.

There is much in P4C that would seem familiar to classroom teachers since the days of Dewey. It emphasises the relationship between meaningful education and children’s experience, it values Socratic dialogue and their participation in the educational relationship, while not losing sight of knowledge traditions. I recognise from my own days as a classroom teacher, many approaches that were an everyday part of subjects like science, language, and social studies, where children were hypothesising, working in groups to justify their thinking, engaging in intentional lateral thinking, etc. So at the level of developing thinking, and even reflecting on the thinking process itself, P4C looks pretty much like business as usual – with some concessions made for the deliberate introduction of traditional philosophical concepts.

The fact that p4c has become a very successful international brand name may, then, relate more to what I would call ‘pyramid building’ than to any radical new philosophical initiative. By pyramid building, I mean the way that academics attract accolades and funding for research projects that may be more to do with popular trends than their intrinsic value. I’m not suggesting here that the pyramids are devoid of content, but that, as with their Egyptian counterparts as tourist destinations, the original significance may have waned in favour of their instrumental value. Attracting funding for research projects has now become big business (some would say the primary business) for universities, and projects that attract significant funding achieve an elevated status, along with the proponents of such projects. Government and business sponsorships are likely to be directed towards projects that support the sponsors’ interests, so it is not surprising to see little significance attached to the work of those that would criticise economic direction. I am not objecting here to the principles underpinning p4c, or any other philosophy programme for that matter – there is clearly much of value therein. I do see, though, that in its retreat to the safety of its cave, philosophy is currently shirking its duty in some areas of thinking – particularly the thinking that needs to be done about the broader social and political issues in education.

Before I let Lipman go, I want to draw upon one more observation of his. Philosophy is a survivor, he says, in an era in which most of the humanities have been driven to the wall. But, he acknowledges, the price of survival has been high: it has survived largely by converting itself into a knowledge industry. Philosophy has had to ‘abdicate virtually all claims to exercising a socially significant role’ contributing to what he calls ‘the continued social impotence of philosophy’ (Lipman, 1988, p. 212).

Philosophy as dangerous

I want to suggest another possible role for philosophy in schools, in terms of Maxine Greene’s ‘education for freedom’, and the somewhat more radical Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘philosopher of the future’. Both represent a challenge to philosophy and an invitation to extend its meticulous gaze beyond the immediate pedagogical environment, to probe the less visible (but thereby, more insidious) influences that shape both the official curriculum and broader societal agenda for its educational institutions.

Maxine Greene

Although her focus is on American schools, there is little in Greene’s analysis that is uniquely American. She refers to the passivity and disinterest that prevent discoveries in classrooms and discourage inquiries, reminiscent of Dewey’s notion of the ‘anaesthetic’ in experience, as what numbs people and prevents them from reaching out, from launching inquiries. It is not, she says, simply a matter of motivation or interest; but rather, a problem with the absence of freedom in our schools. This is not just a reference to the ordinary limits and constraints, or even the rules established to ensure order. She is talking about the apparent

absence of concern for the ways in which young people are conditioned by their circumstances – a form of cultural reproduction, involving ‘not only the reproduction of ways of knowing, believing, and valuing, but the maintenance of social patternings and stratifications as well.’ (Greene, 1988, p. 132).

The challenge for educators, she says, is to ‘engage as many young people as possible in the thought that is freedom’ (p. 133). Developing a concern for the critical and the imaginative, and opening up new ways of looking at things is, she contends, wholly at odds with the technician and behaviourist emphasis in schools. The remedy is not to be found within the heavily subjugated structure of schooling, but in an external focus on the broader political spectrum:

I do not think it sufficient to develop even the most variegated, most critical, most imaginative, most ‘liberal’ approach to the education of the young. If we are seriously interested in education for freedom as well as for the opening of cognitive perspectives, it is also important to find a way of developing a praxis of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary for the remaking of a democratic community (Greene, 1988, p. 134).

Such an opening would mean, says Greene, ‘fresh and sometimes startling winds blowing through the classrooms of the nation’ (p. 134). Our traditional modes of sense-making – the academic disciplines, the fields of study – all have a place as particular kinds of questions posed at particular moments in time. But none of them should be considered complete or all-encompassing. In the multiple worlds our young people inhabit, new languages are needed to deal with the new undercurrents, the new questions, the new uncertainties. As educators, our role is to grant audibility to these numerous and different voices in an attitude of mutuality and responsiveness to others, struggling alongside our students as subjects in search of their own projects, their own ways of making sense of the world. We are in the realm here, of what Nel Noddings (1994) describes as *care*, as we step out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the others: ‘When we care, we consider the other’s point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment, is on the cared-for, not on ourselves’ (p. 24).

Rational argument falls somewhat short of the task in hand, as we face the issue of incommensurability, in search of critiques that uncover what masquerade as neutral frameworks – what Rorty calls, ‘a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict’ (Rorty, 1979, p. 316). Amid such multiplicity and with an attitude of inquiry and care for the other, philosophy has the capacity to redefine the territory of education and to challenge the political frameworks that blinker both teachers and students alike. Without the assurance of commensurability, without the promise of any final answers, teachers and students are left with questions, with tentative modes of inquiry, with multiple stories, and with the possibility of ‘communities grounded in trust, flowering by means of dialogue, kept alive in open spaces where freedom can find a place’ (Greene, 1988, p. 140). But, says Greene, ‘spaces have to be opened in schools and around the schools, the windows have to let in the fresh air (ibid.).’

Nietzsche

With the windows wide open, it is refreshing to recall the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, a self-professed ‘philosopher of the future’ (Nietzsche, 1990a, p. 71), for whom the philosophical task is manifest in his image of the ‘free spirit’, positioned uncomfortably outside the prevailing *mores*, prepared to challenge the status quo, and so destined for a life of solitude:

It seems to me more and more that the philosopher, being *necessarily* a man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, has always found himself and *had* to find himself in contradiction to his today: his enemy has always been the ideal of today. Hitherto these extraordinary promoters of mankind who have been called philosophers and have seldom felt themselves to be friends of knowledge but, rather, disagreeable fools and dangerous question marks – have found their task,

their hard, unwanted, unavoidable task, but finally the greatness of their task, in being the a bad conscience of their age. Nietzsche, (1990a, p. 143)

There is little in Nietzsche's work as hard hitting as his lifelong commitment to the interrogation of truth. His own foreword to *Twilight of the Idols* positions the book as 'a grand declaration of war' on eternal idols (Nietzsche, 1990b, p. 32). Subtitled 'How to Philosophize with a Hammer', it easily evokes images of destruction and demolition. Yet, Nietzsche is careful to point out that the idols are being 'touched with the hammer as with a tuning fork'. He was to clarify some years later that what he refers to as *idol* was 'simply what has been called truth so far. *Twilight of the Idols* – that is, the old truth is approaching its end' (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 314). There have been, he says, 'no more ancient idols in existence' and also 'none more hollow', but that does not prevent their 'being the *most believed in*', although 'they are not, especially in the most eminent case, called idols' (Nietzsche, 1990b, p. 32). In typical colourful style, and amplifying his triumph over what has been called truth so far, Nietzsche goes on: '...to pose questions with a hammer and perhaps to receive for answer that famous hollow sound which speaks of inflated bowels... that which would like to stay silent *has to become audible*' (Nietzsche, 1990b, p. 31)

For Nietzsche, such challenges typify the free spirits who are the 'actual philosophers', the commanders and law-givers. It is they who determine the 'Wherefore and Whither of mankind', reaching for the future with a creative hand... 'everything that is or has been becomes for them a means, an instrument, a hammer' (Nietzsche, 1990a, p. 143). Nietzsche is quick to contrast his figure of the actual philosopher with what he calls 'philosophical labourers' like Kant and Hegel, whose work constitutes taking existing creations of value (sometimes called 'truths'), identifying them, and reducing them to formulas: 'It is the duty of these scholars to take everything that has hitherto happened and been valued, and make it clear, distinct, intelligible and manageable, to abbreviate everything long, even 'time' itself, and to *subdue* the entire past' (Nietzsche, 1990a, p. 142). Far from providing the open window and the fresh air alluded to earlier, these philosophical labourers are portrayed as a 'narrow, enclosed, chained up species of spirits... closed windows and bolted doors ... eloquent and tirelessly scribbling³ slaves of the democratic taste and its 'modern ideas' (Nietzsche, 1990a, p. 72).

Nietzsche's opposition to his 'philosophical labourers' runs deep, with criticism directed at their glorification of the abstract, at their lack of historical sense, and at their denial of the senses in favour of abstract reason. We perceive the world, says Nietzsche, in terms of plurality, change, and becoming; whereas *their* preference is for a world of unity, of substance and duration – a preference underpinned by abstract reason. Reason, Nietzsche says, is the cause of our falsification of the evidence of the senses. In so far as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie: 'It is what we make of their evidence that first introduces a lie into it, for example the lie of unity, the lie of materiality, of substance, of duration' (Nietzsche, 1990b, p. 46).

They think they are doing a thing *honour* when they dehistoricize it... when they make a mummy of it. All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive. They kill, they stuff, when they worship, these conceptual idolaters – they come a mortal danger to everything when they worship' (Nietzsche, 1990b, p. 45).

These false philosophers pose as having made their discoveries through the 'self-evolution of a cold, pure, divinely unperturbed dialectic', whereas what happens at bottom, Nietzsche claims, is that they are merely defending a prejudice, a notion, an 'inspiration', generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, with reasons sought after the event. They are then, no better than 'cunning pleaders for their prejudices, which they baptize *truths*' (Nietzsche, 1990a, p. 36).

He sees that philosophy under the yoke of the university (for our purposes, read 'schools') has no dignity or fire, and is no longer 'dangerous'. At the conclusion of his essay on Schopenhauer, Nietzsche makes a final plea for the importance of philosophy and its need to be powerful and fearsome:

‘Beware’, says Emerson, ‘when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk.’ It is as when a conflagration has broken out in a great city, and no man knows what is safe, or where it will end (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 193).

And, stepping up to the mark, donning the mantle of the dangerous philosopher:

I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous – a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up *against* everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 326).

Conclusion

Philosophy and schools? Children and dynamite? Hardly the easiest of bedfellows! So, in considering the relationship between philosophy and schools, I’m left with two answers.

What I’ve called harmless philosophy may have an explicit place in schools, supporting a conservative agenda, sharpening up reasoning ability and promoting thinking about abstract thinking. Such engagement is likely to leave existing educational frameworks intact, traditional classroom programmes and interactions valid, and the purposes of schools unquestioned – as long as one ignores disruptive behaviour. There is room for philosophy in schools – Plato’s cave remains undisturbed.

Philosophy of the dangerous kind, though, is a different matter. To the degree that it is abhorrent to schools, it is probably needed. If schools are to go beyond their current functioning as government-directed networks of social and cultural subjectivity, then philosophy needs to exercise its critical faculties. Troublesome possibilities then arise for political, conceptual and social transformation. Commitment to critical philosophy becomes, then, a flexing of political muscle – a necessarily surreptitious activity on the part of individual teachers, operating outside the official curriculum and frustrated by increasing surveillance and demand for accountability. Philosophy of the dangerous kind is, then, a commitment not so much to philosophy *in* schools, as to philosophy *over* schools.

Notes

¹ Compulsory attendance is monitored in terms of truancy and disciplinary measures like stand downs, suspensions, exclusions and expulsions – this lot under the guise of student presence and engagement (Ministry of Education, 2007).

² Donzelot includes in this group those practising psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy and psycho-pedagogy. The ‘psy’-specialists are charged with shaping subjectivity at the intersection of society and family. Unlike the priest who is handicapped by being riveted to his defence of moral values, and unlike the doctor who operates within restricted operational codes, the ‘psy’ specialist is, according to Donzelot, a “specialist in indecision”, furnishing a “neutral terrain for the resolution of differences of regime between the management of bodies and the management of populations”, their discourse allowing them to “*circumscribe this position, to mark out its circuits and block its exits*” (Donzelot, 1997: 229-230).

³ Scribbling was obviously a powerful insult. Schopenhauer, too, had a lifelong contempt for Hegel and his ‘pseudophilosophy’, referring to him as a common charlatan (1847:60) and an impudent scribbler of nonsense (1847:166).

References

- AGCP [Advisory Group on Conduct Problems]. (2009, November 2009). *Conduct Problems: Effective Programmes for 3-7 Year-olds*. Retrieved 16 December 2009, from [http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/pagesmh/9995/\\$File/conduct-problems-effective-programmes-for-3-7-year-olds.pdf](http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/pagesmh/9995/$File/conduct-problems-effective-programmes-for-3-7-year-olds.pdf)
- Cohen, M., & Naylor, L. (2008). Philosophy in Schools. *The Philosopher*, LXXXVI(1). Retrieved 12 September 2010, from <http://www.the-philosopher.co.uk/p4cgallions.htm>
- Donzelot, J. (1979). *The Policing of Families*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline & Punish* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). London: Penguin.

- Greene, M. (1988/2000). The Dialectic of Freedom. In R. Reed & T. Johnson (Eds.), *Philosophical Documents in Education*. New York: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- Hartvelt, J. (2010, 29 August 2010). Tolley hits at 'silly political game'. *Sunday Star Times*, p. 7.
- Lipman, M. (1976). Philosophy for Children. *Metaphilosophy*, 7(1), 17-33.
- . (1977/2000). Philosophy in the Classroom. In R. Reed & T. Johnson (Eds.), *Philosophical Documents in Education* (pp. 221-225). New York: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- . (1988/2000). Philosophy Goes to School. In R. Reed & T. Johnson (Eds.), *Philosophical Documents in Education* (pp. 212-221). New York: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- . (1994/2000). Do Elementary School Children Need Philosophy? In R. Reed & T. Johnson (Eds.), *Philosophical Documents in Education* (pp. 207-212). New York: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- Long, F. (2005). Thomas Reid and Philosophy with Children. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39(4), 599-614.
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *Statement of Intent 2007-2012*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- . (2010a, 4 June 2010). *Education initiatives*. Retrieved 8 September 2010, from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EducationInitiatives.aspx>
- . (2010b, 24 March 2010). *Terms of reference - Independent Advisory Group for National Standards*. Retrieved 16 September, 2010, from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EducationInitiatives/NationalStandards/TOR.aspx>
- . (2010c, April 2010). *A Vision for the Teaching Profession: Education Workforce Advisory Group Report to the Minister of Education*. Retrieved 10 June 2010, 2010, from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/~media/MinEdu/Files/TheMinistry/Consultation/WorkforceAdvisoryGroup/WorkforceAdvisoryGroupFinalReportPDF.pdf>
- New Zealand Government. (2009, 7 December 2009). *Positive Behaviour for Learning Action Plan 2010-2014*. Retrieved 16 December 2009, from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/~media/MinEdu/Files/TheMinistry/PositiveBehaviourForLearning/PositiveBehaviourForLearningActionPlan.pdf>
- Nietzsche, F. (1983). Schopenhauer as Educator. In C. Taylor (Ed.), *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (1989). *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Vintage.
- . (1989). *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Vintage.
- . (1990a). *Beyond Good and Evil* (R. Hollingdale, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- . (1990b). *Twilight of the Idols & The Anti-Christ* (R. J. Hollingdale, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Oakley, C. (2010). *National Standards (Research paper 2010/03)*. Retrieved 7 July 2010, 2010, from http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:nAkAgT_0TrkJ:www.parliament.nz/en-NZ/ParlSupport/ResearchPapers/
- Quinton, A. (1995). Philosophy. In T. Honderich (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- R0b. (2010, 30 June 2010). *The paper that Anne Tolley censored*. Retrieved 16 September, 2010, from <http://thestandard.org.nz/the-paper-that-anne-tolley-censored/>
- Reed, R., & Johnson, T. (2000). Introduction. In R. Reed & T. Johnson (Eds.), *Philosophical Documents in Education* (pp. 204-207). New York: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Young, A. (2010, 30 June 2010). Tolley upset at paper on standards. *New Zealand Herald*.