The Teacher as Phronimos : Cultivating Phronesis in Teacher Education

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Abstract: Neo-Aristotelian concepts concerning education and phronesis has been developing in two directions: first, towards educating phronesis and the revival of phronesis-inspired moral education theories, and the second, towards cultivating professional wisdom in the framework of professional education. Amidst the extensive and complex discussions on phronesis development theories and approaches and searching for suitable educational methods for phronesis development, both in students and in educational practice in general, there is a strong underlying affirmative assumption that the teacher holds an essential role of classrooms' phronesis development. Although there is an extensive discussion on what phronesis means for the teacher, a less discussed topic is that of the ethical education at the teachers' university. Contrasted to the strong conceptual support for enhancing teachers' training curricula with ethical education, is its practical negligence; wherever this aspect is not neglected, it is not contributing adequately in enchasing students' moral growth. This article attempts to examine the theoretical possibility for virtue attainment in the context of university experience. It will comment on the current curriculum contribution to the phronesis development in the education of future teacher. To that end, the article argues for a need for a humanities courses focus in teachers' university education on the basis of thesis that education is a moral act and that phronesis is the virtue of the humanities.

Keywords: Teacher, education, phronesis, curriculum, humanities.

1 Introduction

The author that was relatively neglected in the discussions on the virtue of practical wisdom (phronesis), but who is actually the first proponent who considered phronesis as a virtue of the humanities, far before Gadamer (1979) in the 20th century, is Giambattista Vico. Referring to both Descartes' geometrical method as a new model of knowledge and to the Aristotelian virtue of phronesis, Vico concludes: "If you were to apply the geometrical method to practical life, 'you would do no more than spend your labour on going mad rationally (/becoming rational lunatic)'" (*De Antiquissima,* 7.5.; 1988, p. 98). Vico is concerned about education of the young and holds that neither specialization in particular topics that fall into falsehood, nor philosophical criticism that disdain probabilities, best fit their growth. Vico is proposing teaching the totality of sciences and arts so they can grow in phronesis and eloquence, by imagination and memory. He is

insisting on eloquence, but understood in a broader sense, and draws a strong connection between eloquence and phronesis since both consider particulars and ars topica, tend to persuade, consider circumstance and precedence, consider passions and require insight (cf. Поповска, 2019).

A vast reflection and investigation has been done since Vico's insights of phronesis education, especially in the last 40 years. The two general directions in which phronesis in education[1] is developed are: first, towards educating phronesis and the revival of phronesis-inspired moral education theories, (cf. Curren, 2000; Kristjánsson, 2007; Sanderse, 2012, etc.) and the second, towards cultivating professional wisdom in the framework of professional education (cf. Walker & Ivanhoe, 2009; Bondi et al., 2011; Kinsella & Pitman, 2012, etc.).

Phronesis is strongly embedded in the process of education that involves complex context-sensitive deliberation; it is a practice that requires flexible and sensitive judgment in context-changing educational circumstances. The teacher should nurture receptivity to specific educational situations and problems, flexibility in their interpretation and solution, openness to new and unexpected situations and ability to relevantly and creatively apply general pedagogical knowledge.

Phronesis in the complex educational context is differently interpreted and can be related to "giving practical arguments" (Fenstermacher, 1987), "discrimination" (Sherman, 1989), "discernment" (Schuchman, 1980), "phronetic insight" (Dunne, 1993), "pedagogical tact" (Van Manen, 1991) etc. The ancient Greek term "krisis" (discernment, discrimination) has important role in the educational exercise of phronesis. Also, perception, or practical perception is emphasized, in correlation with the metaphor of the vision and the eye used in works of Aristotle for description of phronesis (Dunne, 1993). In most of the approaches, a slight tip towards of the particularist view can be observed, probably as a reaction of the dominant rule/principle-based approaches.

This article will focus on an element that is considered as the fundamental one for phronesis development in the classroom – that of the moral education of the teacher. Seeing the teacher as phronimos (practically wise person) is the key element for a phronetic education in general. The teacher should not be taken as an external factor of the students' internal and external moral processes, but as a key factor for properly guiding and motivating pupil's own affinities by connecting them with their life contexts. In this article, the possibilities for cultivating phronesis in teacher university education and the curriculum support for this cultivation will be examined.

2   Enchasing Virtues at University

First of all, we need to face with the Socratic dilemma: can virtue be learned, especially in adult age? In this connotation, Bok asks: can higher education foster higher morals (Bok, 1988)? Does higher education have the capacity to enchase ethical sensibilities,

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[1]   Cf. Popovska, 2022. Part of the ideas presented here were previously elaborated in this paper.

specifically in faculties of education where professions are grounded in ethical dimensions? And finally, is it too late or too early for education students to learn virtue? A brief turn into the neo-Kohlbergian and neo-Aristotelian interpretation referring to this question will be made. In a Socratic manner, both perspectives are responding positively to the above-mentioned questions; however, the approaches they use are different.

In the dominant neo-Kohlbergian perspective, in the post-conventional schema in which university students are usually expected to be, the development is possible in terms of gaining consensus by appealing to ideals and logical coherence. Post-conventional reasoning refers to shared ideals for organizing social cooperation, which are negotiable and open to investigation by others. The emphasis is laid on rationality and developing moral epistemology, but also on a critical shift from conventional thinking, usually in late adolescence (cf. Mechler, Thoma, 2013). Opposing this perspective and having in mind the moral development in pre-professionals and professionals, Nash (1996) holds that they resist moral classification and regardless of personal experience, level of maturity, age, stage or gender, students come at ethical problem-solving in a variety of ways, both on and off developmental schedule. He thinks that background beliefs, social and psychological contexts, formal and informal training and organizational norms are better predictors for moral development than stage or schema theory.

The neo-Aristotelian perspective is less formulaic, less hierarchical and less age-connected. The moral development is possible in adulthood and is enhanced through the years and experiences, but its enchasing dwells not only in the logical coherentism and moral reasoning development, but in the realm of character and phronesis development. There are different neo-Aristotelian approaches; two of the most recent ones will be mentioned here. According to Darnell et al. (2022) there are four components of phronesis attainment: virtue identification, selection and relevance (constitutive function), making action choices and their justification (integrative function), building moral identity (blueprint function) and empathy and perspective taking (emotion regulation). As opposed to the perspective of acquisition of interior personal qualities, Rajský and Wiesenganger (2021) accentuate relationality and "the other" as a key aspect for the constitution, acquisition and realization of phronesis.

Students come to university with already formed beliefs, instincts and a consciousness for others. If there is an open space left for them to detect and understand ethical issues and to think about them more carefully, it seems that this can make a change in their professional and personal behaviour. Having undergraduate ethics education does not warrant developing full phronesis, but it inevitably extends the previously nurtured moral experience and knowledge. It is not too late – future teachers get acquainted of their own character, beliefs and values about themselves as teachers, but also about the society and the world. According to the neo-Aristotelian perspective there is no point where cultivating phronesis ends; on the contrary, the more we are exposed to life circumstances, the more it is cultivating. Is it too early? There are viewpoints that dealing with, reflection on, and understanding ethical issues can only be motivated if it is embedded in educational practice. However, moral dimensions can be influenced (Yost,

1997) in both formal, through curriculum, and informal ways, through university activities and practices and student engagement, like participation in learning community, research participation, interaction with peers and faculty, writing essays, community service activities (Wei Lin Chen & Yun-Wen Chan, 2020). It is shown that moral growth can change within a short period of time, such as university years (Evans et al., 2010), and that university experience is a powerful contributor towards that growth.

The university context brings out many of the key elements for phronesis cultivation: relatively good amount of life experience, a capability to make conscious deliberative nuances of the ethical situations and new and diverse experiences with faculty and peers with whom the student shares similar interests. It is a good ground for qualitative shift from habitual virtue to phronesis-inspired virtue and culmination of one's behaviour in informed and phronetically directed practice, if introduced adequately.

3   Curriculum Contribution

How do undergraduate education curricula contribute to the possibility for cultivating phronesis? It is not a novelty that there is strong conceptual support for enhancing teachers' training curriculum for moral education (cf. Yost, 1997; Malone, 2020). However, besides this strong support it can be demonstrated that pre-service teacher education does not contribute adequately to enhancing the ethical sensibility of future teachers (cf. Warnick & Silverman, 2011; Campbell, 2011). Even the literature considering character education for teachers, the discussions and terminology often resemble the standard scientific narrative (Jope, 2014).

There are disconcerting results that shows consistently-found lower levels of moral growth demonstrated by education students and future teachers and that other undergraduate students with majors other than education do experience such growth over their college career (McNeel, 1994; Lampe, 1994; Cummings et al., 2001). In the research of McNeel and Lampe, there is a report of even a decline of moral reasoning in education students between entry and exit of their studies. Cummings et al. (2007) suggest two reasons for this: characteristics of the students themselves as they choose their program as less difficult compared to others; and factors related to the content of the teacher education curriculum, which may account for the deficiency in moral growth of education students (cf. McNeel, 1994).

Teacher university education curricula often fail to integrate awareness of and discussion about ethical issues in teaching. Consequently, teachers who graduate from such programs may not be able to reason about and respond to the many moral and ethical issues that arise daily in the context of the dynamic classroom. One of the radical implication is that teacher education students may become teachers who are not fully aware of the moral impact of their actions and teachers whose moral judgement is no higher than that of their students.

These curricula tend to emphasize courses that are skills and methods-oriented and devoted to technical competence at the expense of courses that incorporate more abstract

content (McNeel, 1994; Yost, 1997; Cummings et al., 2001). Courses like philosophy, sociology, pedagogical psychology, logic, ethics in education, even if they are part of the curriculum, are usually elective. According to Campbel, there is practical negligence in the undergraduate teachers' curriculum and wherever this aspect is not neglected, it is not contributing adequately, especially in terms of applying it in individually accountable practices (Campbell, 2011). Engagement in work related to the ethics of teaching, according to her, tends to be vague, indirect and uncertain in tone. In the words of the participants of her research, even if an ethical issue occasionally 'did come up', it never seemed planned and was often in reaction to a student-initiated question. There was consensus among all participants that they 'were not overly certain as to which components of the programme were ethically related', especially in so far as the connection to daily practice is concerned. She detects three broad thematic areas in the so-called implicit ethics curriculum – 1. Standards and laws, 2. Social justice education, and 3. Negative modelling from the field.

Hence, what constitutes dominantly the explicit teachers' ethical education curriculum? The topics that are dominantly permeate the curriculum are usually the dos and don'ts in the educational practice. Stevens (1974, as cited in Nash, 1996) is alarming the opposite – never freeze at particular do's and don'ts. This "specious moralism" that is nurtured in the professional ethics usually brings about over simplistic moral formulas, rules and codes that should be practiced in the professional practice. As opposed to this technical narrative arises the phronesis narrative, which emphasize the emotional practice of education and the emotions in the educational discourse, where the cultivation of teacher's personal qualities and character are required, as opposed to the exclusively impersonal and disinterested approaches. According to the phronesis narrative, the educational practice does not represent a technology of pedagogy based on behavioural science of learning, nor is it a procedure subject to experimentation and observation that is standardized and measurable.

Cummings et al. (2007) suggest that education students' lower moral growth rests on the possibility of an ideation poverty of the courses they attend, which prepare them to become educational technicians. Students have to be challenged with contents rich in ideas and theories in order to recognize the importance of morality. Thus, having in mind this tendency, a considerable focus should be put on ethical education and other core humanities courses in educational curriculum for educators, both as a separate course and throughout the curriculum in an explicit, not implicit, way. Enchasing moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation, moral character can be more effective in curriculums that have more liberal arts focus.

However, only stacking the curriculum with various humanities courses is not the solution; for a proper phronesis infusion, both moral perspective and practical problem--solving should be included. The teacher's education curriculums have nor simply to teach particular codes and rules of professionalism, neither abstract versions of theories, but also to demonstrate vividly how moral judgement and sensitivity are played out in the actual details of practice including both cognitive (reflection, analysis, justification) and

emotive elements (intuition, feeling, intention, communities, personal narratives and language).

4   Conclusion : Education on Humanities Ground

The "two-way illumination between particular and universal" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 306) in educational and teaching contexts has its own specific challenges. Universals like: various theories of the goals of education and teaching, curriculum goals and contents, teaching methods, school and classroom rules, lesson planning etc., should be connected with particulars like: particular teacher with her/his own teaching and personal specificities, particular students that come from various particular socioeconomic, cultural, religious, political, intellectual, emotional contexts in particular school and particular classroom etc. Having in mind all of these variables and invariables one can get the impression that educational context is an unhospitable ground for developing phronesis. However, the same applies to life. Referring to Nussbaum and her reflections on conditions of human life, Jope (2014) discuss the educational challenges in the framework of the concepts: uncertainty, vulnerability and particularity, as conditions of the educational and especially of teacher's life. Life, as well as classrooms, are changeable and uncertain; the risk of loss and the danger of conflict in the (educational) world of perishable objects and relationships makes us vulnerable; our human life lays always in the particularities and is historically/contextually embedded. According to him, it is of ethical relevance how everyone in the educational context, especially the teacher, is reacting to this uncertainty, vulnerability and particularity because it is where phronesis arises.

It is precisely on these aspects that a focus should be put in ethical education of teachers, aspects that presuppose a broader humanistic education. As Gianbatisata Vico, and afterwards Gadamer have pointed out, phronesis is the virtue of humanities and, education which has a strong ethical mission, has to be necessary brought back at the humanities ground. There must be a strong moral component emphasized in teacher's education, because education itself is a moral act and teaching is an ethical practice that should lead to phronesis.

A final question emerges here, whose answer will have an essential role for our future phronesis investigation, in education and in general: what is the place of professional phronesis that relates to the specific (educational) practice within the universal phronesis? In the vast tradition of history of philosophy, phronesis has been reread, revisited and re-conceptualized within every philosophical paradigm and era and has always retained its basic conceptual presuppositions, but has been "flavoured" with the local and temporal "spices." Our contemporary phronesis also has its own specificities. In the 20th century, phronesis became a symbol for the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment abstract mind. According to Heidegger it is the "other kind of knowledge," a concept he uses in favour of his critique of the Western interest for the concept of being and its insistence on the idea of positioning the man in the world. In general, phronesis is

taken to symbolize the turn from the transcendental scientific mind to practical, empirically based thought. The phronesis of 21st century, has deepen this practicality and empiricality, strongly reflecting our deep devotion to separation, partition and specialization, and this can be testified in the various professional concepts of phronesis – educational phronesis, medical phronesis, social work phronesis, business and management phronesis, law phronesis, police phronesis etc. These particular, techne motivated "practical wisdoms" go way beyond the Aristotelian concept and are theoretically justified by, as Kristjánsson (2014) calls it, re-constructivist narrative, as opposed to the exegetical one. New contexts require new interpretations, but this tendency of partitioning phronesis seriously decline from the core sets of principles that constitutes the concept of phronesis. Thus, professional education morality should be derived from the general moral identity and character that should be afterwards moulded trough the specificities of professional education contexts. Without cultivating general moral identity and character, we are faced not only with the possibility of nurturing rational educational lunatic, as Vico has alarmed, but of nurturing a narrow-minded one also. This again shows the complex, circular and interrelated connections of all educational factors and stages which bring us back again of the importance of early phronesis development, which includes those of the future teachers.

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Bio

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