

Philosophy and Teacher Education:

Paradox or Paradigm?

By

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What is the role of philosophy in teacher education? As the three of us have explored this question, we have come to realize we have very different perspectives as a result of different experiences with the philosophical foundations of education, with formal studies in philosophy, and in our roles as teacher educators and administrators. As a philosopher/mathematician, educational historian, and curriculum theorist, we represent a wide variety of perspectives as we explore this question. Emerging from our discussions and a convergence of our perspectives is our concern with and commitment to philosophical inquiry as critical to the preparation of the next generation of teachers and teacher educators. To represent what we suspect are some of the variety of perspectives on this matter, we will offer our differing views of this question. We hope, as we explore this question, that we will engage others in a conversation about what philosophy can mean and perhaps has or has not meant to teachers.

#### Why Philosophy?: A Philosopher's Perspective

[Jayne's perspective] I came to education after my masters degree in philosophy. I think I was attracted to education, just as I had become disenchanted with philosophy – because I saw the problems of kids and their lives as very deep and very real. Philosophy took on new meaning for me as I left formal studies in philosophy and turned to wrestle with the ethics, logic, epistemology and ontology of the every day. My students shared my enthusiasm for the problems in the foundations of mathematics, the paradoxes of the infinite, and the problems of free will. Intellectual and cultural history found its way into just about every mathematics and computer science class I taught at the high school level as the tools of my chosen profession, philosophy, equipped me to make sense of, with my students, the confusing and painful times of adolescence and the transitions of modern thought in the content areas. Why, for example, had Russell's paradox been so problematic for the foundations of mathematics? Why was Cantor's

calculus of the infinite so revolutionary? How do Wittgenstein's language games apply to the learning of mathematics? How does Whitehead's ontological approach to speculative philosophy inform my understanding of the complex web of relationships in classrooms?

As a teacher educator, I came to understand the value of my philosophy background, not for my understanding of the foundations of mathematics or my ability to help teacher education students deconstruct constructivism, but as the questioning, probing, searching, and exploring that is quintessential philosophical inquiry. Exploring philosophical problems as the cultural and historical unfolding of Western society helped me understand better what education was really about. I would hope that my students also found value in the philosophical questioning and inclusion of the intellectual heritage of culture in my classes – aspects of their formal education that are typically overlooked or marginalized. Nevertheless, as someone who had chosen to pursue a doctorate in philosophy, and who also chose to leave the formal study of philosophy (at least as represented by philosophy departments) after my masters degree, I always wondered who failed whom? Had I given up on philosophy, or had philosophy given up on me?

In *The problems of philosophy*, Bertrand Russell (1912/1959) describes the value of philosophy:

[U]tility does not belong to philosophy. If the study of philosophy has any value at all for others than the students of philosophy, it must be only indirectly, through its effects upon the lives of those who study it. It is in these effects, therefore, if anywhere, that the value of philosophy must be primarily sought. (p.153)

The value of philosophy, for me, began as I left it. It began, as I have come to see, now after 20 years of being a classroom teacher, university professor, and university administrator, with a way of life, a habit of inquiry, an openness to the unknown, praxis as critical reflective practice. To

me, the question of the value of philosophy for teacher educators echoes my own experiences with philosophy. I have experienced and enjoyed the formal study of philosophy, then expanded my philosophical investigations to the realm of education, impacting and influencing the lives of my students, adding life and dimension to my curriculum, and enriching my understandings of the schooling context.

As I have found value in my own philosophic background, I have to question of what value would philosophy have for my teacher education candidates? Why should THEY study philosophy in teacher preparation programs? I'd like to believe preservice teachers can find value, as I have, not in the answers, but in the questions, not in the responses but in the reasons for the questions in the first place. As formal philosophy has become disconnected with the every day, however, we can challenge how studying philosophy in teacher preparation can avoid the same fate. How can we prevent, as Whitehead (1929) complained, so technologizing the study of philosophy in education that it becomes void of any real meaning or purpose in the practical art of teaching? "Under the influence of mathematics, deduction has been foisted onto philosophy as its standard method" (p. 16), Whitehead lamented. The same fate may have occurred in the study of philosophy in teacher education programs, and for the same reason; namely the focus in 20<sup>th</sup> century Western education on efficiency and production approaches to education.

Thus, just as philosophy's inability to explore practical problems and its focus on method as a technical approach to philosophical investigation has relegated the philosophical domain to the philosophers, education finds itself a product of the same abstraction, same sterility, and same scientism. By turning philosophical inquiry on itself, Wittgenstein (1953) challenged how philosophy has created artificial, disconnected problems and approaches to problems that are

irrelevant to anyone other than philosophers. A similar examination into the language games of education can reveal the failing of philosophy in teacher education, if there has been a failing, may not be the misapplication of philosophy to education, but the deleterious affects of a system of education that perpetuates the technopoly (Postman, 1993) of the modern machine.

Dwayne Huebner, in his “Challenges Bequeathed” (1996) notes the impact of positivistic and technical approaches to education have diminished the needs for foundations of education with a focus on philosophical inquiry and practical reasoning approaches, echoing the lamentations of Whitehead and Wittgenstein. Is it any wonder that a technology of learning with emphasis on psychological measures and principles has lost site of the human endeavor of philosophical inquiry as historical understanding and future action? Awakening the imagination, an important aspect of philosophical inquiry, is not valued in our technically oriented, scientifically engineered, modern education system.

The disconnect between the idealism of teacher education and classroom teaching is another criticism of colleges of education that may be related to the treatment of philosophy of education in teacher preparation. Attempts to make teacher education more relevant to future teachers and the lives of their students through the study of philosophy are met with criticism for perceived impracticality and abstraction. Teacher education programs have, for at least forty years that I know of, been criticized as being disconnected from the reality of schools. First year teachers are often advised by more experienced teachers: “Forget everything you learned in your teacher preparation program. This is the real world, now.” Just as education, in the past forty years, has tried to create its own theory base and approaches to inquiry, has the public become more critical of the field of education as being separate from the practice of teaching. While these criticisms and sentiments may not be unfounded, the effect has been a noted anti-

intellectual attitude and lack of tolerance for anything theoretical. The perception has become that any attempt to open inquiry in the fields of teaching and learning are distractions from the business of teaching. Central habits of inquiry and connections with intellectual context are discouraged in this climate of technologizing education and “teacher-proofing” the curriculum.

Mary Warnock’s (1994) condemnation that: “the greatest enemy of the imagination is to be locked in the present” reflects poorly on education where we not only accept maintaining the status quo as the goal for teacher preparation but where we also have nurtured a reverence for and mythology of 1950’s ways of thinking that focused on clear goals and outcomes, objective measures, and abstraction from context. By reducing the artistry of teaching to technical skills and labeling as “impractical” or “irrelevant” anything that may challenge the existing practices and culture of education, we have in effect marginalized philosophical inquiry. In a self-fulfilling way, we also find that as we nurture critical, reflective capabilities in our students through philosophical and historical inquiry, we condemn them to the wrath of those who, in actuality, do not want teachers who can think or critique, who are prepared to identify and tackle the really tough problems and, in their own way, make a difference and change education.

Perhaps contributing to the relegation of philosophy in teacher education to the fringes of acceptability is the metaphor evoked by “educational foundations” as the core of teacher preparation. This conundrum, of being a foundational study, on the one hand, and as being marginalized as irrelevant, on the other, is indicative of the very illogicism of education. At the very core of education seems to be a set of paradoxes that indicate our own inability to achieve balance and transition to paradigms more open and relevant in a post-industrial, post-technological world. As Soltis (1990) suggested, the normative aspects of “foundations” are antithetical to philosophical inquiry either as historicity or as a guide to practical reasoning. The

foundations metaphor emphasizes the technical orientation over professional artistry that the public has come to expect of teacher education. Even though “educational studies” replaced “foundations” as the descriptor for the program area housing the study of educational philosophy, educational studies continue to carry the baggage of foundational expectations for the framework of teacher preparation.

The promise, however, is that “educational studies” has reinvented traditional philosophy, reinvigorating an approach to inquiry that is the basis of professional growth. For this, some philosophers criticize educational philosophy and studies in educational philosophy as “non-philosophy” because students are not reading Plato or Dewey or some other philosopher-deemed to have all of the answers.<sup>1</sup> How we have come to evolve philosophical foundations to educational studies will be explored in the next section, from Joan’s perspective, as a way of reawakening the spirit of philosophical inquiry for teacher education candidates and addressing the philosophical question “where’s the meat” – referring, of course, to the meat of philosophy.

#### Historical Perspective of Philosophy of Education and Educational Foundations

[Joan’s perspective] My academic path to educational philosophy and foundations came through the disciplinary perspective of psychology. I had completed a master’s degree and my thesis involved inferential statistics, thereby exposing me to positivism as a paradigmatic framework for doing research. More specifically my thesis research focused on attitude change in an introductory educational foundations course. I worked with one professor who used a more traditional curricular approach and a more experimental approach to helping students understand the burning social issues of the times. Interestingly enough, I found significant differences

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent criticism of teacher education programs, a study compared syllabi from top colleges of education in a variety of subjects including educational foundations courses. The criticism was made that none of the syllabi had students read primary works by or made reference to classic educational philosophers.

between the two approaches and became intrigued with the content and scope of the field of educational foundations. I was very interested in understanding the different perspectives from which research could be conducted, and was frustrated by the fact that the most interesting research questions could not be answered by the experimental model. This was the 1970s and research perspectives that utilized qualitative data collection techniques were not highly regarded in educational foundations. I wondered why. Other “why” questions about society and education led me to the door of historical/philosophical foundations of education, and I entered a Ph.D. program in history, philosophy and comparative education.

As a doctoral student and then a teacher educator, I continued to be fascinated with the philosophical underpinnings of issues in education and educational research. However, my interest was usually contextual and my quest led me to view these issues from a historical perspective more than philosophical. The two converged in the areas of intellectual history, such as understanding how Dewey’s instrumentalism affected teachers and the school curriculum in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Parenthetically, this convergence led me to biographical research and Dewey’s star pupil, Dr. Ella Flagg Young, the first female superintendent of Chicago—1909-1915.

As a teacher educator whose initial teaching responsibilities included those undergraduate Foundations of Education courses that usually introduce educational students to the profession, I struggled with how to make the content meaningful. This was particularly true of the philosophical perspective. Once again, my historical curiosity led me to the past and the formation of foundations of education.

As teacher education became part of university curriculums, the study of history and philosophy of education was part of the respective disciplinary studies. However, it suffered

from a lack of educational focus. For example, when Dewey was at the University of Chicago, he brought long time teacher educator, Ella Flagg Young, to be the educational philosopher for the new teacher education program. He said that he would go to her with these abstract, philosophical ideas and she would translate them into their empirical equivalents. Liberal arts faculties criticized the teacher education curricula as “devoid of scholarship and generally worthless—a bag of tricks imparting method without content, technical skills at best” (Cohen, 301). By the 1930s Social Foundations of Education was developed by a group of reconstructionists at Teachers College, Columbia. But it wasn’t until 1947 at the University of Illinois that the concept became a reality. A Division of Historical, Comparative, Philosophical and Social Foundations of Education was formed along with a body of principles that defined the field as one with a problems-oriented focus to education. It was to utilize experimental techniques in the pursuit of solving these socio-educational problems in order to deal with education and educational policy. The organization of courses around the social foundations approach became very popular throughout the 1960s and 70s when the field was challenged, once again, for its relevancy and its lack of disciplinary focus. Budget cuts forced many universities to close their foundations programs and those that were left rallied together to save the field. The AESA (American Educational Studies Association)—the main foundational association—banded together with the Philosophy of Education Society and the History of Education Society to develop a coordinating board that would outline a set of standards to be used by accrediting bodies such as NCATE. The Council of Learned Societies in Education was the result, and by 1977 they published a set of standards. I was part of the group that helped develop the standards and that worked with NCATE to ensure their prominence in NCATE standards. In the meantime, many former foundations programs changed their name to

Educational Studies, in part to reflect the larger national association's focus and also to move away from the old controversies.

Having come through this period I can say that Educational Studies was an easier descriptor to explain to prospective students than foundations had been. However, my approach did not change that much. In my undergraduate foundations courses, I still dealt with the philosophical issues in the same manner. In general, the study of educational philosophy can be intimidating to teacher education students. It takes some time to help them understand its importance and relevance. I have often used a very simple forced-choice survey to introduce philosophical concepts. The instrument deals with the curriculum, approaches to teaching and learning, and views of children, and teachers. They score their own answers that can be produced in a simple bar graph to help them understand how their thinking relates to the ideas of well-known philosophers. This usually helps "break the ice" for philosophical study. Students can start to see some of the philosophical underpinnings that form the basis of educational practices today. They can also apply it to their own views of human nature. In short it gets them to a deeper level of thinking and reflecting. I remember one class that was very candid in their confusion about the different perspectives that they were getting in their various educational psychology and methods courses. It was a source of confusion for them, because even though professors were using constructivist-type theories and philosophy, the interpretations seemed to be in conflict. It became an excellent opportunity for learning about the different ontological and epistemological perspectives of some of the philosophers, and it also became a forum for understanding points of intersection.

In educational research, I have noticed that students may have had qualitative and quantitative research courses, but they don't necessarily understand the ontological and

epistemological bases for the different methodologies. In the documentary and narrative inquiry course that I teach, I usually spend some time discussing the philosophical frameworks that underpin these methodologies.

I think this is where the “meat of philosophy” can and should be found in teacher education programs. While my research continues to be in educational history and biography, I cannot discount the importance of educational philosophy for teacher preparation programs. Unfortunately, I think philosophical perspective—even the foundational/educational studies focus—is lacking in many teacher education programs across the country. In the late 1980s AESA conducted a survey and found that many programs had no foundations-type course in their teacher education programs. Also, those that did have them usually had non-foundational graduate assistants or instructors teaching these courses. I think this is one of the main dilemmas that educational foundations faces in a present and future that seems to promise fewer additional resources for university-based teacher education programs. Nevertheless, the potential for philosophical “meat” and relevance is still there and as important as it has ever been.

#### Critical Introspections and Ruminations

[Doug’s perspective] My experience with philosophy of education, like Jayne’s and Joan’s, has been a circuitous, convoluted, and, at times, camouflaged one. Among other journeys, I have traveled in educational and school psychology programs as well as in historical and philosophical foundations of education studies. I have spent much of my gypsy-like career in administrative positions—director of programs, department chair, associate dean, and dean—in six institutions. Along the way, I have enjoyed having tenured appointments in psychology, educational philosophy, curriculum theory, and, on one occasion, welcomed a joint appointment in a Department of Psychology and a Department of Teaching and Learning. The diverse

background, administrative assignments, joint appointments, and gypsy tendencies have been both enjoyable and informative. The different expectations that students have brought to their studies of psychology, philosophy of education, and curriculum studies are noteworthy if somewhat discouraging. More disheartening is to engage in discussions with some faculty who have negative beliefs similar to those of many students. Particularly poignant is walking from a classroom where the examination of personality or curriculum theory is immediately deemed relevant, interesting, applicable, and valuable and then into a classroom where philosophy of education is perceived to be nearly the opposite. Many reasons—some founded and others without foundation—help explain these perceptions and experiences.

My reflections, then, are on why philosophy of education is often depicted in a less than positive fashion. If we've engaged in discussions with our students, colleagues, and graduates, the following six overlapping ideas are already known in some form by most of us. First, philosophy of education is seldom widely appreciated by students, practitioners, or teacher education faculty. The perceived and, sometimes, actual strangeness and irrelevance of the subject—as taught—continues to trouble us. The ghost of pedagogy past still haunts us: a lack of student engagement with ideas, an unappetizing teaching by unimaginative professors, and dead course curricula revisit us regularly.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, many teacher education faculty don't significantly value, if inclusion in the required curriculum is an indicator, philosophy of education, even if teacher education students do. Difficult curricular choices have to be made and most professors, including philosophers of education, are not going to vote to eliminate their own specialties from programs of study. To expect otherwise is to fantasize of an academic world that probably never has been nor ever will be on a large scale.

Third, we've seldom been people of "the alternate reality," i.e., school people. Consequently, we have not been seen by most students as addressing the everyday realities of classroom teachers, school principals, and counselors. Actually, few teacher educators are tuned into the everyday realities of school personnel although we frequently don't realize it and often assume we are in sync with them because we've taught in P-12 schools five to thirty years ago. But we as philosophers of education may rank near the bottom of the scale in terms of understanding the daily lives of students, teachers, administrators, and related school personnel. If we ever have been school people, we are like many—perhaps, most—teacher educators: our experiential knowledge base is both badly dated and increasingly thin.

Fourth, part of our problem may be that there is no general consensus of what a philosophy of education course or curriculum should be. That is to say, we can approach our course from any perspective we wish—and we do. Other teacher educators sometimes do the same but in an under appreciated and misunderstood field like ours we compound our problems. Rather than shielding ourselves from criticisms of our courses by appealing to academic freedom and saying our discipline demands that we pursue whatever it is that we teach, we might be well advised to reconsider our notion of academic freedom and examine the diverse subject matter taught by others in philosophy of education courses to determine if our view of philosophy demands that we address the topics that we do or if it is merely our preferences that dictates our course content.

Fifth, the changes in other and the addition of new teacher preparation fields have probably made us less appealing in the eyes of our colleagues and further weakened our position in the academy: teacher educators who study and teach about critical theory, feminism, gender questions, multicultural and diversity concerns, curriculum theorizing, postmodernism, gay and

lesbian issues, critical literacy, and so forth seem to see us as less important rather than more important. They already cover the relevant normative, interpretative, and critical questions. Thus, while this perception is generally a mistaken one (exceptions abound where philosophers of education study these issues), the question of whether we are really needed unconsciously influences our status. Maybe we should ask ourselves how we can respond in a constructive manner to this often unstated question of worth.

Perhaps one other set of ideas needs to be mentioned: we seem to spend too much time expressing our disappointment with not being valued by our peers, former students, and policy makers, arguing about whether existing philosophy of education courses are genuinely educational *and* philosophical, and debating the pros and cons of whether all philosophers of education ought to be school people. Of course, we need to discuss these—or, at least, a couple of these—questions, but we also need to imagine a few new—at least for many of us as individuals—questions, too. For example, how are we going to make our courses so influential that students will learn and use the philosophical thinking they need as professional educators regardless of the course title? What are we going to offer and gain from the students and teacher in the third-grade class where we volunteer each week? What are our colleagues doing in their courses? Are our courses philosophically pertinent to their emphases? Should we teach Aristotle, Dewey, Freire, or Greene this term and how will we get our students to see the relevance of their studies to the field experiences they are having and the teachers they will become? What old topics ought to be discarded and new ones integrated into our courses this semester? Should we throw away our recipe-approach to philosophy of education and study it through the eyes of the teachers in the middle school where we are teaching one morning a week? Are we well advised to abandon philosophy of education as we currently perceive it in

favor of another perspective? Is it possible that we should even desert philosophy of education for some of the same reasons Dewey suggests it may be professionally dead? Is there anything we are currently teaching that is clearly significant and meaningful for the teachers of our own children? What courses can we design or teach that students and faculty will genuinely appreciate? How can we get the issues that concern practitioners into our thinking and teaching and the thinking of practitioners into the issues that ought to concern them? Of course, most important questions will vary by professor, student, course, and context. The point is not that answering the previously stated questions per se will solve our problems, but that we should become strangers to our own specialty and teaching and answer the inquiries of students, colleagues, and practitioners. We seem well advised to see these groups as curriculum and teaching consultants rather than professional detractors.

In the end, however, we should probably remember that in an instrumentalist, technocratic, and pragmatic culture and subculture, we are likely to remain on the fringe or margin of educator preparation programs. If we want a revolution that will overthrow the established view of our field, that is fine, but it is probably a trip that will take us to a castle in the sky. A revolution to install philosophers of education as pedagogical queens and kings or even as highly respected citizens of colleges of education is about as feasible as attempting to make Wittgenstein the major reference point in designing early childhood programs in preschool centers. Perhaps this conclusion will be viewed as pessimistic and self-defeating. Perhaps it is. Maybe it isn't. If doing and teaching philosophy of education enthusiastically, imaginatively, rigorously, and beautifully and understanding and appreciating P-12 students, teachers, and schools is a mistaken way to study and teach, then a better route is welcomed. If focusing on local successes and creating new opportunities for serving the profession is wrongheaded, then

closing this door is fine. But we should all welcome traditional and novel ways of helping future educators think philosophically and teach reflectively. Conversely, we can be optimistic about imaginative and insightful philosophers of education being able to handle the evolving challenges that are thrown our way and the contributions that we make. We can probably be less than optimistic about those who wish to see a required course titled philosophy of education in pre-service teacher preparation programs. On the other hand, perhaps we should be somewhat pessimistic about philosophy of education as a graduate degree program surviving in the future. This pessimism may be tempered if fresh ways of addressing an old idea are designed. That is to say, if every teacher educator is to a degree a philosopher of education, then perhaps part of the challenge is to have better philosophizing in other fields of study. Perhaps this approach will be a waste of time and contribute further to the decline of philosophy of education. If so, we may want to pick up a figurative shovel and bury our field now. Fortunately, we don't need the shove, because imaginative and insightful philosophers of education are carrying on with or without the perspective offered herein.

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