

The Use and Abuse of the History of Educational Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

As philosophers of education we endure gloomy pronouncements about our work and the prospects for our field. We are told that our scholarship is “boring,”¹ and hear reports that the number of philosophy of education faculty positions is declining.² Students are advised that, if they hope to pursue a career in the field, they shouldn’t focus exclusively on educational philosophy, but rather develop expertise in some other area of education such as curriculum, policy studies, etc. in order to improve their chances of being employed in a school of education.³ Long-time members of the philosophy of education community warn that the lack of relevance of our field for educators might cause the field to “slide into extinction.”⁴ In many ways, we are part of a field in flux; we frequently reconsider the proper domain of educational philosophy and its methods.⁵

Taking stock of our work, and our field more generally, requires an encounter with our past, an encounter that might suggest directions for our future. This year’s PES conference theme – between past and future – invites us to do precisely this kind of work, and this article takes up that challenge. I am interested, particularly, in how we treat our history: what kind of encounters with the history of educational philosophy occur, and what kinds of encounters do we encourage? I argue that we fail to reckon sufficiently with the history of educational philosophy; particularly, our work on the history of educational philosophy (a) too often neglects educational theorists whom we ought to study and (b) adheres to a “history + implications” model that encourages presentism and undermines the value of such scholarship.

WHAT DO PHILOSOPHERS OF EDUCATION DO?

Before I offer such an argument, however, it is worth asking whether it is actually true that educational philosophers neglect the history of educational philosophy. In fact, as I discuss below, there are scholars in our field who believe there is too much published on the history of educational philosophy. In 2012, Mathew Hayden performed a service to the field of educational philosophy by examining the topics covered in *Studies in Philosophy of Education*, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *Educational Theory*, and *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. He included 1,572 articles from 2000 to 2010 to give us an unprecedented glimpse at, as the title of his study suggests, what philosophers of education do. Regarding the history of educational philosophy, Hayden’s analysis shows that 422 articles, or 26.8% of the total, explicitly mention in the title, abstract, or keyword one or more “great thinkers.” But with further probing, it turns out that 76.3% of those are twentieth century “great thinkers.” That leaves only about 7% of articles that mention a pre-twentieth century educational philosopher in the title, keywords, or abstract, and many of those articles do not substantially address the work of a “key thinker” but merely mention one in passing in the abstract or subtitle.⁶ There’s nothing problematic about studying

twentieth century philosophers of education – one could reasonably argue that the single philosopher no one can afford to neglect is John Dewey. Yet Dewey's and others' educational ideas did not emerge *ex nihilo*; they are part of a long tradition of thinking about education. And, therefore, the fact that a mere 7% of educational philosophy articles mention pre-twentieth century great thinkers in the title, keywords, or abstract – and to reiterate, these are journals in educational philosophy, not in education more generally – indicates that educational philosophers do not regularly deal substantially with their history.

IS THERE REALLY TOO LITTLE WORK IN THE HISTORY OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY?

I anticipate an objection to my claim that there is too little work done on the history of educational philosophy. Some would see the 26.8% of articles that mention “great thinkers” and conclude that, as a community of scholars, we spend far too much time on “great thinkers.” Gert Biesta argues that rather than focusing on “so called-original philosophical sources,” we should instead spend time discussing the work of other philosophers of education, and ensure that our work is relevant to the wider concerns of the educational community.⁷

I am largely sympathetic to Biesta's concerns; indeed, as I argue below, I side with him on the issue of focusing on “educational” rather than narrowly defined “philosophical” problems of education. But I disagree (a) that “relevance” should guide our work and (b) about how best to encourage educational philosophers to read and cite each other's work. With respect to the latter, I think that Biesta is right in that, since so few of the scholars in our community are writing historical scholarship, we don't end up productively engaging the scholarship of others in our community when we publish such work. Furthermore, I agree with Biesta that we do indeed need to worry that every paper on Plato or Rousseau seeks to reinvent the wheel, rather than contribute to an evolving scholarly interpretation of Plato's or Rousseau's educational philosophy. However, such an evolution only occurs in disciplines in which a critical mass of scholars are in conversation with one another. Thus, scholarship on the history of educational philosophy is not inconsistent with scholars of educational philosophy engaging one another.

RELEVANCE AND EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Biesta is by no means alone in encouraging us to be concerned about the relevance of our work. Eric Bredo, also weighing in on historical work, writes: “it is often easier to retreat into an analysis of some esoteric philosopher's thought ... than to propose solutions to the educational difficulties of our time.”⁸ John White calls on us to turn away from “inward looking” work in educational philosophy, instead placing broad questions of social policy at the centre of our work.⁹ René Arcilla worries that if our work fails to be relevant, then we, qua faculty members, will fail to be relevant.¹⁰ Robert Floden, in his 2005 Presidential Address at the PES Annual Conference, proposed that our work ought to seek occasions to contribute to conversations about educational aims and policies.¹¹ Bredo, White, Arcilla, and Floden are but four of the many educational philosophers who have called on us to make our work more relevant. Perhaps it seems odd that anyone might argue against relevance; if the field is in trouble, how could *irrelevance* make anything better? Yet

there is one unambiguous advocate of the view that, while we should not embrace irrelevance, we should question the priority of relevance in our field. In the early 1980s, Harvey Siegel responded to the “go practical” ethos with an argument that we should just concentrate on doing good scholarship, regardless of its practicality.¹² Twenty years later, Siegel remained a lone voice in a special issue of *Educational Theory* about the relationship between philosophy and education, arguing against granting priority to conducting relevant scholarship. Siegel wrote:

If philosophy of education fails to engage educators in conversation, and contributes not a whit to the solution of social problems or the flourishing of democratic society, but nevertheless advances its own intellectual agenda – gaining further insight into issues concerning the aims of education, the nature of good teaching, the inevitability of indoctrination, the rights of children, the obligations of schools, or the inability of rational argumentation to provide objective, “power-independent” reasons for particular positions on these and other issues – its future is assured. It is its scholarly agenda, not any Dewey-imposed social one, that determines the content and integrity, and so the longevity, of philosophy of education.¹³

I think that Siegel is right that the philosophy of education community should worry less about relevance and more about setting its own intellectual agenda. I do not know if Siegel would endorse the following, but I argue that we ought to add to Siegel’s list the history of educational philosophy – a subject that warrants study not because it contributes to contemporary concerns (though it may do so), but because it advances the understanding of the philosophical problems of education.

Before I continue, it is worthwhile to note that the neglect of the history of educational philosophy is also, in many ways, a reflection of positive developments in and contributions to our field. Many are attracted to the field precisely because of its relevance to contemporary educational problems. Anecdotally, I have heard numerous people say that they were attracted to “applied philosophy” because they wanted to do philosophy that might make a difference in the lives of others. This is an estimable motivation, and it presents scholars with exciting opportunities – the sort of opportunities that will contribute to the longevity and flourishing of the field.

Second, educational philosophers typically hold positions in schools of education where there exist institutional pressures to produce work that is relevant to a professional school that predominantly focuses on K-12 schooling. Many scholars depend on external funding, which is often awarded for research that prioritizes a direct impact on students and schools. Though this institutional pressure distorts educational philosophers’ intellectual agenda, it is not entirely negative – it often reflects a laudable effort to improve the education of K-12 students.

Third, educational philosophers themselves have challenged the relevance of the history of educational philosophy in two other ways. Analytic philosophers have loomed large in Anglo-American educational philosophy and have relatively less interest in engaging with the history of philosophy, focusing instead on using philosophical analysis to better understand and clarify educational concepts and claims. Others in the field believe that the history of western philosophy is permeated by tacit and explicit biases that have served sexist, racist, imperialist, and other exclusionary ends, and to study it would be, in effect, to endorse it.¹⁴

OF WHAT VALUE IS HISTORY OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY?

I do not deny that it benefits our community of educational philosophers, and the broader educational community, that some, or even many, of us pursue studies on contemporary, “relevant” problems. I also would not want to understate the challenge that historical work might present to those seeking employment as educational philosophers in colleges of education. Yet there are many reasons why engaging with the history of educational philosophy would improve, as Siegel puts it, the “content and integrity, and so the longevity, of philosophy of education,” and I identify six here. The first three describe ways that the history of educational philosophy can be “relevant.” But I then turn to arguments that point to the potential corrosiveness of “relevance” in historical scholarship.

The first reason that the history of educational philosophy is valuable also provides an argument in favor of embracing a canon that many find objectionable. If we neglect to examine the ideas that have come to shape and limit contemporary practices, we cannot take the proper steps to improve them. Claudia Ruitenberg writes: “it is only through a critical examination of our intellectual traditions that we can come to understand our own thinking today.”¹⁵ Wilfred Carr argues that “the future development of the discipline depends on transcending and correcting the limitations of the present by transcending and correcting misunderstandings inherited from the past.”¹⁶ If we do not come to recognize these limitations, they will inhibit our contemporary thinking about education, and they will limit our contribution to educational practice as well.

Second, theorists who ignore the history of their field risk reinventing the wheel. Many fundamental questions of education have received considerable attention from thinkers in the past. Awareness of historical arguments may allow us to build upon sophisticated theories rather than to explore the same ground anew.

Third, engagement with the history of educational philosophy lends us vocabulary and concepts that can serve to advance contemporary arguments about education.¹⁷ This is the primary way that educational philosophers currently make use of the history of educational philosophy. The model for such scholarship entails, first, deriving some vocabulary or a concept from a historical philosopher and, second, working out the practical implications of that vocabulary or concept for educational policy or practice. Henceforth, I will refer to this model as “history + implications.”

“History + implications” may sometimes enable a critical and sophisticated grasp of contemporary problems. However, I think that this use of the history of educational theory potentially creates two serious problems. One, if a paper aims to argue for a particular approach to a contemporary practical problem and, hence, is aimed at a broad audience of educational scholars and practitioners, much of the philosophical work in the first half of the paper will do little to invite a general audience into the work.¹⁸

Two, the “history + implications” model has detrimental consequences for the quality of the historical scholarship. Consider the treatment of Nietzsche in our journals. Because “history + implications” seems to be the standard model for engaging

the history of philosophy in our field, scholars working on Nietzsche do not merely study Nietzsche's ideas on education to see what they uncover. Rather, they seem constantly to bear in mind how they can articulate the contemporary relevance of studying Nietzsche. Concerning ourselves with the implications of Nietzsche's theory, rather than with Nietzsche's theory alone, will sometimes result in a distortion of Nietzsche's ideas into something useful for contemporary educational practice. Hence, in our journals, as Eliyahu Rosenow has revealed, Nietzsche has emerged as "a democratic and liberal educator par excellence."¹⁹ This is not to say that Nietzsche fails to give us cause to think about his uses for democratic and liberal education. Indeed, there will always be intelligent and creative scholars who will identify arguments that challenge the scholarly consensus. However, the disproportionate amount of work that identifies Nietzsche's practical benefits for contemporary education should make us question whether "history + implications" is the ideal model for our historical scholarship in educational philosophy. To repeat, the model has value, and we should continue to use it when we are indeed interested in using historical ideas to reflect on the present. But when we want to explore educational ideas, we should be free to focus on better understanding those ideas, regardless of whether their immediate use in education is evident or desirable.

The fourth benefit of more work on the history of educational philosophy concerns determining our own intellectual agenda. Part of the anxiety over the relevance of our scholarship arises from the fact that we see educational practitioners and the broad educational community as the audience for our work. By holding others to be the audience of our work, we also empower them to be the arbiters of our work. Concern with the reception of our work by others can be a good thing, for it might help us to see more clearly the parts of our work that are needed and appreciated by others and, consequently, encourage us to do more of it. However, we cannot expect such a concern to sustain our discipline. Scholarship on the history of educational philosophy positions us as arbiters of the quality, integrity, and value of a greater proportion of our intellectual agenda.

Fifth, it would be pedagogically useful for students (but not only for them) to work on the complex and sophisticated arguments about educational philosophy that are found throughout its history. To elucidate, for example, problematic assumptions in the No Child Left Behind policy is valuable. But for students of education to work on more intellectually-taxing historical arguments about the purpose of education in society cannot but help their scholarly development.

Sixth, if we believe that the philosophy of education is important – that is, problems of education, broadly conceived, are of vital human concern – then some members of our community ought to work on the history of the conversations that contribute to our understanding of these problems. One might object, "but shouldn't we leave these historical questions to historians?" Historians of education today, I would reply, are most often historians of schooling. As such, they neglect the history of educational philosophy even more than we do. Occasionally, classicists and others work on the periods and educational ideas with which we are concerned. As a scholarly community, however, it is up to us to articulate the relationships between different

periods and ideas, which historians, classicists and others may or may not study. Most importantly, it is our community that can ask, to borrow the words of Richard Watson (who was writing about the history of philosophy generally), “what did the philosopher say? ... what did the philosopher mean to say? ... Did he support his position adequately or inadequately? ... How did the philosopher’s contemporaries respond? Who had the better arguments? What developed philosophically out of all this?”²⁰ With respect to educational philosophy, these are questions we are disposed to ask and that we are best-suited to answer. If members of our community do not address these questions, then we run the risk that no one will.

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY VERSUS EDUCATIONAL THEORY/THOUGHT

Biesta is correct that educational philosophers are overly concerned with the history of philosophy as academic philosophers construe it. Anxiety over our relationship to the parent discipline has occasionally led to a slavish focus on philosophers from the “philosophical canon” and the exclusion of important figures who shaped educational theory in fundamental ways. James Muir has forcefully criticized our scholarly community for failing to deal adequately with its own history. Muir has sought to elevate Isocrates, Plato’s rival, to a more prominent place in the history of educational theory, particularly because of his profound influence on liberal arts education.²¹ Muir is undoubtedly correct about the importance of Isocrates, not only historically, but also for his crucial and substantial contributions that shaped, and continue to shape, the conversation in educational philosophy. Our general failure to understand this competing conception of civic education, contested by Plato, limits our ability to understand Plato’s educational ideas (and Plato is one of the few historical philosophers to which we occasionally refer). Furthermore, despite the fact that we generally acknowledge the influence of Locke’s work on education, we publish so little on him that he did not make Hayden’s list. And, despite frequent reference to him, we published only 12 articles on Rousseau in these journals.²² But Isocrates, Locke, and Rousseau are just a starting point. Our field should be studying “non-philosophers” who articulated important educational theories such as Xenophon, Catherine MacCaulay, Helvetius, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Friedrich Froebel, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Maria Montessori. And despite our great affection for Dewey, we should not neglect his less celebrated colleagues like George Counts, Isaac Kandell, and William Bagley. We will continue to neglect a valuable resource for our scholarly community, educational researchers, and educational practitioners if we do not begin to do a better job of identifying and studying key conceptions of education. If such work requires us to label our canon as the history of educational theory or educational thought, rather than the history of educational philosophy, because it engages figures who are not typically identified as philosophers, I say that we would sacrifice little.

CONCLUSION

I do not suggest that everyone in our community should produce scholarship on the history of educational philosophy, nor that we should cease doing “relevant” work. Rather, I offer three suggestions for ways to address the lack of attention to

our history. First, I hope that we might define our intellectual agenda more broadly and recognize that the history of educational philosophy is within its domain.

Second, I think that we should recognize that there is a tacit “history + implications” model to which much of our historical work conforms, and that we must encourage and allow for work on educational philosophy that is not based on this model. I suspect that this is no small matter, as “relevance” is deeply entrenched in the evaluative criteria of our scholarship. Our journals and conferences routinely require that submissions relate to contemporary educational policy or practice. Such a criterion must be called into question. If tomorrow the gatekeepers in our community opened the door to historical work that does not conform to the “history + implications” model, that would be a critical initial step to improving the quality and diversity of historical scholarship in educational philosophy.

Third, we need to spend some time cultivating our canon, which currently fails to encompass important educational theorists who may not be readily identified as “philosophers.” I recognize that our identity among educational researchers and other academics, and our very self-identity, is based largely upon being “philosophers” who do educational philosophy. And I know that I will convince few to surrender the title. But, personally, I would call myself an educational theorist rather than an educational philosopher if it freed me to focus more on philosophical problems of education, regardless of whether we find them in the work of so-called philosophers or others. The history of educational thought presents an open invitation for current scholars—there are contrasts to be made, conceptions to be explored, and assumptions to be exposed. We ought to encourage people to accept that invitation.

1. D. W. Hamlyn, “Need Philosophy of Education Be So Dreary?,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 19, no. 2 (1985): 159-165, 159.

2. For example, see Nicholas C. Burbules, “The Dilemma of Philosophy of Education: ‘Relevance’ or Critique? Part Two,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 349-357, 349-50; Daniel Vokey, “What Are We Doing When We Are Doing Philosophy of Education?,” *Paideusis* 15, no. 1 (2006): 45-55, 47.

3. Burbules, “The Dilemma of Philosophy of Education,” 350.

4. René Arcilla, “Why Aren’t Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1-11, 10. See also the notes of despair in Dennis C. Phillips, “Philosophy of Education: In Extremis?,” *Educational Studies* 14, no. 1 (1983): 1-30, 1; and Eric Bredo, “How Can Philosophy of Education be both Viable and Good?,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 263-271.

5. On the nature of educational philosophy, see, e.g., George Pollack, “Philosophy of Education as Philosophy: A Metaphysical Inquiry,” *Educational Theory* 57, no. 3 (2007): 239-260. On the methods of educational philosophy, see Claudia W. Ruitenberg, *What do philosophers of education do?: and how do they do it?* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

6. Matthew Hayden, “What Do Philosophers of Education Do? An Empirical Study of Philosophy of Education Journals,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 31, no. 1 (2012): 1-27.

7. Gert Biesta, “Editorial: Publishing in Studies in Philosophy and Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 1 (2010): 2-3; see also Gert Biesta, “Is Philosophy of Education a Historical Mistake? Connecting Philosophy and Education Differently,” *Theory and Research in Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): 65-76.

8. Bredo, “How Can Philosophy of Education be both Viable and Good?,” 270.

9. John White, “Philosophy, philosophy of education, and economic realities,” *Theory and Research in Education* 11, no. 3 (2013): 294-303, 303.

10. Arcilla, "Why aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?," 10.
11. Robert E. Floden, "When is Philosophy of Education?," in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana-Champaign: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006).
12. Harvey Siegel, "How 'Practical' Should Philosophy of Education Be?," *Educational Studies* 12, no. 2 (1981): 125-134; Harvey Siegel, "The Future and Purpose of Philosophy of Education," *Educational Theory* 31, no. 1 (1981): 11-15; Harvey Siegel, "On the Obligations of the Professional Philosopher of Education," *Journal of Thought* 18, no. 2 (1983): 31-37; and Harvey Siegel, "John White on Philosophy of Education and Philosophy," *Theory and Research in Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): 120-127. See also, Israel Scheffler, "Reflections on Educational Relevance," *Journal of Philosophy* LXVI (1969): 764-773.
13. Harvey Siegel, "Philosophy of Education and the Deweyan Legacy," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 273-280, 279.
14. A position challenged in David P. Burns, Ann Chinnery, Claudia W. Ruitenberg, and David I. Waddington, "Taking on the Traditions in Philosophy of Education: A Symposium," *Paideusis* 18, no. 2 (2009): 3-18.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Wilfred Carr, "Philosophy and Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 1 (2004): 55-73, 59. See also, drawing on MacIntyre: Vokey, "What Are We Doing When We Are Doing Philosophy of Education?," 51.
17. See the recent discussion (drawing on R.S. Peters) about the value of this sort of historical scholarship in Stefaan E. Cuypers, "The Power and Limits of Philosophy of Education," *Theory and Research in Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): 54-64, 57-8.
18. See also John White, "The Medical Condition of Philosophy of Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 21, no. 2 (1987): 155-162, 160.
19. For a comparison of Anglo-American and German educational philosophers' articles on Nietzsche, see: Eliyahu Rosenow, "Nietzsche's Educational Legacy: Reflections on Interpretations of a Controversial Philosopher," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34, no. 4 (2000): 673-685, 675.
20. Richard A. Watson, "What is the History of Philosophy and Why is it Important?," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40, no. 4 (2002): 525-528, 525. See also, M.A.B. Degenhardt, "Philosophy of Education and the Historical," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 18, no. 1 (1986): 25-35, 26. Marc Depaepe offers a helpful disciplinary distinction: "When studying classic texts on education, for instance, historians lay far more stress on the context than on the text itself, in contrast to philosophers, whose priorities are the exact opposite." Marc Depaepe, "Philosophy and History of Education: Time to bridge the gap?," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39, no. 1 (2007): 28-43, 30.
21. James Muir, "Political doctrine, philosophy, and the value of education: The legacy of Isocrates and the Socratic alternative," *Journal of Educational Thought/Revue de la Pensée Éducative* 33, no. 3 (1999): 255-278; James Muir, "Is our history of educational philosophy mostly wrong?: The case of Isocrates," *Theory and Research in Education* 3, no. 2 (2005): 165-195.
22. The inattention to Rousseau has been partly corrected recently as two special issues – *Educational Theory* (Vol. 62, no.3) and *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (Vol. 31, no. 5) – were published on him in 2012 (after the period of Hayden's analysis) on the 250th anniversary of *Émile's* publication.