

The Role of the Social Foundations of Education in Programs of Teacher Preparation in Canada

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Abstract

This paper argues that the social foundations of education, and particularly the disciplines of history, philosophy and sociology of education, must continue to play an integral role in programs of teacher education. We report on the decline of the study of history of education within Faculties of Education in Canada as an example of the marginalization of the role of the social foundations in teacher education programs generally. In this context we furnish what we take to be some of the strongest reasons for the requirement for future teachers to engage with the social foundations—some of these arguments apply to all of the foundational areas, and some apply to specific foundational disciplines. Some of these arguments will be familiar, some new. We conclude that if a teacher education program in Canada is to be of a very high quality then it must include a strong social foundations component.

Keywords: teacher education, sociology of education, history of education, philosophy of education, social foundations of education

Résumé

Cet article affirme que les fondements sociaux de l'éducation, et particulièrement les disciplines telles que l'histoire, la philosophie et la sociologie de l'éducation, doivent continuer à jouer un rôle intégral dans les programmes de formation des enseignants. Nous faisons rapport du le déclin de l'étude de l'histoire de l'éducation au sein de facultés

d'éducation au Canada, comme un exemple de la marginalisation du rôle des fondements sociaux dans les programmes de formation des enseignants en général. Dans ce contexte, nous fournissons ce que nous pensons être parmi les plus fortes raisons, en tant qu'obligation pour les futurs enseignants, de se familiariser avec les fondements sociaux - Certains de ces arguments s'appliquent à l'ensemble des domaines fondamentaux, et certains s'appliquent seulement à des disciplines fondamentales spécifiques. Certains seront connus, d'autres nouveaux. Nous en concluons que si un programme de formation des enseignants au Canada se veut être un programme d'excellence, alors il doit inclure une composante importante sur les fondements sociaux.

Mots clés: formation des enseignants, sociologie de l'éducation, histoire de l'éducation, philosophie de l'éducation, fondements sociaux de l'éducation

The Role of the Social Foundations of Education in Programs of Teacher Preparation in Canada

In this paper we argue explicitly that the social foundations of education must form a strong component of high quality teacher education programs in Canada.¹ Despite the declining role of the foundations in teacher education programs,² we believe that there are good reasons for ensuring that students gain some exposure to the social foundations of education generally, and we believe that there are very good reasons why students need to gain some familiarity with knowledge and understanding gained from each of the disciplines of history, philosophy, and sociology.³

Recognizing the importance of the foundational studies, the American Council of Learned Societies in Education stated that teachers must “exercise sensitive judgments amidst competing cultural and educational values and beliefs” and therefore require such judgments to be shaped by “studies in ethical, philosophical, historical, and cultural foundations of education” (1996, p. 5). In 1996, the Council published the *Standards for Academic and Professional Instruction in Foundations of Education, Educational Studies, and Educational Policy Studies*. Endorsed by the American Educational Research Association, the *Standards* stipulate that roughly 16% of teachers’ professional studies should be within the realm of the “humanistic and social foundational studies” (Lucas & Cockriel, 1981, p. 342–43). Despite these standards, Faculties of Education across North America are increasingly characterized by unquestioned ideologies, often leaving prospective teachers with the erroneous impression that there is one “right way” to teach (Hare, 2007). In contrast, Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko have argued (2009) that teacher education should offer multiple—not singular—perspectives on teaching and learning (p. 107). Many others have written about the importance of the social foundations of education and their place in initial teacher education programs (Butin, 2008; Chartrock, 2000; Crocker, & Dibbon, 2008; Sadovnik, Cookson Jr., & Semel, 2001).

Our own backgrounds are as scholars in the social foundations of education: one of us is a historian of education, one a philosopher, and one a sociologist. Collectively, we have over 40 years of teaching in several teacher education programs across Canada.

¹ This paper is the development of work first presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education at Carleton University in May, 2009. That session was chaired and responded to by John Wiens, and we wish to thank him for his insightful response to our work at that time, as well as the participants in that session for their generous questions and feedback. We also wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for this journal, whose comments have strengthened the paper greatly.

² There are a variety of common terms denoting teacher education programs, including teacher education, initial teacher education, and teacher preparation. We use these terms interchangeably in this paper to denote undergraduate university degree programs offered concurrently with other undergraduate studies, or consecutively after a first undergraduate degree, leading to initial teacher certification in Canada. Many of the arguments we present apply to all aspects of teacher education, including mid-service, but we address our comments specifically here to initial, pre-service education.

³ While the social foundations of education often includes anthropology of education, and sometimes other areas such as aboriginal education, we confine our specific comments here to those disciplines we know best. We believe many of the arguments we provide apply equally to other foundational areas of study.

While we each care deeply about our own disciplines, we each also feel strongly about the fundamental importance of strong teacher education programs, and are concerned that the role the social foundations play continues to diminish over time. We are convinced that if our standards for our school-aged students are going to be high, then our standards for our teachers must also be high—in terms of a deep introduction to their practice; in terms of the complex knowledge, skills, and dispositions they must understand and master; and in terms of their understanding of how contested much of educational practice is.

We proceed in the following manner: As an example of the declining role played by the social foundations in our teacher education programs, we review the role that the history of education as a discipline has played in both teacher education programs, and in Faculties of Education, in Canada. We then canvas some of the strongest reasons for being concerned about the declining role of the foundations in teacher preparation; some of these reasons apply to the social foundations generally, and some to individual disciplinary areas. We conclude with some general comments about the role that the social foundations play in an initial teacher education program.

The Changing Role of the Social Foundations in Teacher Education: The Case History

The history of ‘history of education’ as a field of study provides a good example of the general decline in the role played by all of the social foundations disciplines: history, philosophy, and sociology. History of education courses, for example, have long been staple components of teacher preparation programs across North America. Despite the value claimed for them by the American Council of Learned Societies and others, the social foundations have been seriously marginalized in teacher education programs throughout North America (Christou, 2010). For example, an informal survey of 10 mid-sized to large universities across Canada indicates that between 1988–89 and 2008–09 there was a 45% decline in education faculty members whose stated area of expertise is educational history.⁴ Furthermore, throughout this 20-year period, every Faculty of Education surveyed had experienced a decrease in numbers of historians—even those for whom the overall number of faculty members increased.

There are other indicators of history’s loss of prominence in educational studies. Although roughly 1,000 papers were presented at the 2009 conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE), merely 2% were historical in nature. Similarly, from 2006 to 2009, only 2% of the articles published in Canada’s flagship education journal—the *Canadian Journal of Education*—were historical in focus. This indicates a 6% decrease over the 2000–04 period. These data are not surprising when one considers that between 1996 and 2002, only 8% of Canadian history of education articles

⁴ Universities surveyed: Alberta, Calgary, Concordia, McGill, Manitoba, Memorial, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Simon Fraser, and Victoria. Information was also requested from Dalhousie, Lethbridge, Montreal, Queen’s, Toronto, and Western but these universities did not keep records from 1988.

appeared in education journals, the remainder appearing in mainstream historical journals.

The reasons for this marginalization are complex. Many researchers attribute the decline of history in education programs to the nature of teacher preparation. Teacher education has been described as “long on classroom practice and analysis,” but “short on philosophical and historical analysis” (Liston, Witcomb, & Borko, 2009, p. 108). This is perhaps partly due to the fact that students consistently rank their history courses as less useful than their methods courses in preparing them to become teachers (Howey, 1988; Simoes, 1992). In fact, in Crocker and Dibbon’s 2008 study of initial teacher education programs in Canada, program graduates perceived the historical and philosophical foundations of education to be the *least* useful among 18 program content areas typically covered in initial teacher education programs. Dippo (1991) attributes this to pre-service teachers’ inability to translate foundational knowledge into classroom practice (p. 44). Indeed, as far back as 1969 Neville Scarfe, Dean of Education at University of British Columbia, proposed that one of the key challenges of teacher education was that young people find it hard to translate educational thought into practice (p. 187).

The controversy over the value of the foundations in teacher education is not new. Once a mainstay of early normal school programs, the history of educational history reveals that, in fact, as a discipline it has been alternatively embraced and attacked throughout the 20th century (Cole, 1969; Cremin, 1955; Monroe, 1910). Between 1915 and 1933, with the increasing popularity of Pestalozzian principles and manual training, critics from within education circles accused history of education courses of being too traditional and theoretical for the times. By mid-century, the chorus of critics had expanded to those outside of the field of education. Until the 1950s, most criticisms came from educationists who argued that history was not practical enough for professional programs.⁵ By the late 1950s, mainstream historians in Humanities faculties attacked educational history for being too applied and “a-historical from the point of view of modern historical scholarship” (Harris, 1963, p. 661). They further alleged that education faculties allowed history to be taught by people trained in disciplines other than history, namely psychology, curriculum, or administration.

Although the value of educational history has been asserted repeatedly in educational thought, its place in teacher education has been compromised over the years by unproductive criticisms that history is neither practical enough for educators, nor broadly humanistic enough for mainstream historians. Viewed through the lens of time, these criticisms arose during historical eras when it was acceptable to battle for the right to tell “the” history of education. Adopting a post-modern position, most scholars no longer believe in ‘a’ correct version of history—there are now many histories of education (Wilson, 1999). We believe that teachers and teacher educators have the right to a usable past and that ‘histories’ of education—conceived as broadly sociological or narrowly pedagogical—have valuable roles to play in teacher preparation programs.

⁵ By the mid-1950s, educationists were arguing that historical knowledge of education enabled teachers to participate more fully in policy decisions in schools and throughout the community (McCaul, 1958, p. 5).

Arguments for the Social Foundations as a Key Component of Teacher Preparation

There are very good reasons why the social foundations need to figure prominently within programs of teacher education. An important aspect of examining the act and aims of teaching itself is philosophical; questioning what it is teachers are attempting to achieve raises important philosophical questions that need to be addressed in a program of educating teachers. These philosophical questions are vitally important given that teaching itself is an epistemological and moral act, and must proceed in ways intended to promote better thinking and reasoning by students, and in ways that are morally acceptable.

For a deeper understanding of the social context that the day-to-day acts in the classroom take place within, students also need an understanding of the historical and sociological context of the classroom and of schooling. Specifically, the study of sociology and history provides beginning teachers with a conceptual lens through which to view teaching and learning; a beginning understanding of schools and school systems as examples of social structures; an awareness of the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic disparities that exist in society and in schools; and an opportunity to critique current educational practices and the gap that sometimes exists between what we *say* we do and what we *actually* do in schools. We will expand on each of these points in turn.

Teaching is an Epistemological Act

Teaching is inherently about giving people reasons why they should believe what they are being told, and engaging in a public examination of the virtue of those reasons (Strike, 1982). Teachers do this for at least six distinct reasons: i) to get our students to believe that what we are telling or showing them to be true is true; ii) to get our students to know why we believe that what we are telling them is true is indeed true; iii) to get our students on the inside of the practice of reason-giving within the subjects we are teaching; iv) to help our students develop for themselves the ability to decide whether what we are telling them is true; v) to get them to engage in general in the practice of demanding and assessing reasons, and so deciding for themselves what to believe and helping others to engage in this too; and vi) to help our students see the moral necessity of at least the last three of these.

All of these reasons for the giving and assessing of reasons can and should be taught as part of teaching curriculum subjects to students in teacher education programs. To this, we would add two points: first, these claims need to be examined explicitly in order for teachers to understand the nature of the project in which they are engaging. And second, to the extent that they are taught explicitly—in that we examine such claims about the role of a teacher in terms of reason-giving, including such things as what others have written about such claims, how this relates to other beliefs about knowledge, or morality, or teaching, and what the implications of this are for teaching—then what is being taught is philosophy.

Teaching is a Moral Act

Teaching involves envisioning for others what would be beneficial for them to know or be like, and to try to influence those others to achieve those ends for themselves. Such choosing alone involves traversing moral ground, but teaching also involves a power relationship; this is amplified by the context of most of our teaching, which involves students at an impressionable age—people who have no choice as to whether to be in school or not.

Schooling also involves more general social and moral aims, such as the promotion of respect. The task of promoting respect by itself requires of a teacher some understanding of what we mean by respect generally, understanding why it has central importance to us, and also knowing how a range of particular situations and issues demand the application of respect—including such situations as day-to-day interactions of students and teachers, and also such issues as multiculturalism.

William Hare has argued (1993) that good teachers must have a range of qualities or excellences, and we believe this is right. At least some of these qualities—such as courage, empathy and humility—are clearly moral. Preparation for teaching, therefore, must also involve a critical examination of these virtues and how they are called upon in teaching.

Public Education is about Promoting both Autonomy and the Ability to Engage in Democratic Debate and Defend our Democratic Institutions

The promotion of an individual's ability to make important decisions for him or herself is an important argument in favor of publicly funded education in liberal democracies. In the everyday activities of a teacher, this requires a continual navigation between teaching students what they need to know, and encouraging them to make up their own mind about those facts and others (Kerr, 2006). And as our own pre-service students seem to be keenly aware, this can also invite conflict with parents and others in the community who do not believe that certain values and beliefs should be questioned.

Life in a liberal democracy also requires that we collectively defend and promote the values of our democracy—such as equality, justice, and freedom—and one aim of publicly funded schooling must be to teach students how to critically engage in civil society, and how to work for change. This, too, requires an understanding of the tenets of democracy, and knowledge of what the demands of these tenets are on us as citizens. There is widespread disagreement, both among philosophers and others, about what things such as equality mean, and what the appropriate ways to effect change are; an ability to engage in debate about these, too, is a necessary part of participation in democracies. It is certainly not only in social foundations courses (or in Faculties of Education) that pre-service students should engage with and think about such things, but it is here that their relation to education and schooling is explicitly examined.

These first three arguments are about the fundamental nature of teaching, of working in schools, and of education in liberal democracies. We believe that teachers need at least an introduction to each of them; teachers need to think about what these mean, why they are true, how they apply to specific situations, in order both to be able to think deeply about broad questions about their jobs as teachers, and also to be able to

make everyday decisions of the sorts teachers are called on: how to divide their time, how to engage in class discussions of contentious issues, how to deal with problematic moral situations as they arise, and so on.

We are not, of course, claiming that it is necessary to have had philosophical training in order to be a good teacher. There are many teachers who have had little introduction to these three areas as topics who are nonetheless excellent teachers, in the sense that they are successful at teaching students what they need to, they are respectful and exhibit other virtues, they are engaged in their profession, and so on. Nor are we claiming that an introduction to any of these topics will necessarily make one a better teacher. But it is necessary to have spent some time thinking about questions such as these in order to consider our aims as teachers—as participants in the enterprise of public education—in order to think deeply about what we must do. Considering these questions will help us to teach both our subject matter and those other important lessons we teach, such as ethical behavior and democratic responsibility. That is, knowledge of what others have said on these topics makes possible informed decisions aimed at improving one's performance and our shared practice.

The arguments described so far are specific examples of what Dan Butin has termed (2005) the 'Liberal Arts Answer' for why the social foundations matter to teacher education: they are about students understanding how schools and teaching are linked to our broad social goals, and what we believe is morally and epistemologically defensible. Thinking about them may also address another of Butin's answers to why the social foundations matter: his 'Teacher Retention Answer.' Clare Kosnick and Clive Beck have recently argued (2009) that among the priority areas for teacher preparation are the needs to develop a professional identity and to develop a vision or philosophy for teaching; they argue that these lead "to greater professional success and satisfaction" (p. 146). Encouraging our students to think deeply about what it means to teach and about the moral dimensions of our enterprise underpin the development of these areas.

One of the potential challenges Kosnick and Beck give for developing a vision of education is that such visions are often too abstract (p. 154). This points to a major challenge for teaching philosophy of education, particularly to individuals who are learning about the nuts and bolts of classroom life, and looking forward to the challenges they will face there in the next year or two. If we teach such topics too abstractly we will likely lose many such students. Fortunately there are many contemporary and contentious issues that arise in the practice of schooling that connect directly to issues that philosophers are interested in, and the potential influence of the outcome of a philosophical debate on classroom practices is often stark.

Teaching is Itself an Inherently Philosophical Activity

To the extent that good teaching involves attempting to make concepts clear, to think through issues and concepts in a shared manner, to engage in dialogue about what the meanings and implications of things are, to attempt to decide together on what shared understandings are most useful, and to demand that our reasoning be publicly defensible, teaching is itself an inherently philosophical activity. That is, a good deal of good teaching proceeds as good philosophy does. Perhaps a similar parallel can be drawn

between good teaching and other subjects to some extent. But it seems to be particularly true of a discipline that makes those aspects and criteria themselves the explicit subject of its study.

A Conceptual Lens through Which to View Teaching and a Language for Understanding the Human Condition

Sociology can provide both a conceptual lens through which beginning teachers can view teaching and a language for better understanding aspects of the human condition that become obvious once they begin practice-teaching in schools. As many scholars have noted, making the transition from being a student to being a professional teacher can be a complex, challenging, and even humbling journey (Mandzuk & Hasinoff, 2010; Russell & McPherson, 2001; Tepperman, 2010). As prospective teachers attend classes in faculties of education and as they begin working with their own students during their practicum, they inevitably look back on their *own* experiences as students. They begin to see parallels between their own school experiences and those of the students they are expected to teach. Unfortunately, many of those students come to school feeling alienated, marginalized, and ambivalent about their identities as students and about learning in general. Some have difficulty accepting those in positions of authority and are reluctant to conform to their wishes. Understanding sociological concepts such as alienation, marginalization, ambivalence, authority, and conformity can help prospective teachers understand their past experiences as students, their current experiences as pre-service teachers, and, perhaps most importantly, the experiences of many of their own students.

Students who feel alienated, for example, often do so because they find their schoolwork meaningless. As a result they become estranged from tasks that they are expected to be intrinsically motivated to do, and experience a sense of powerlessness. Most pre-service teachers have had such experiences at least once in their lives, and reflecting on those experiences and seeing them as alienating or marginalizing can enable them to recognize the same conditions in some of their students. From this perspective, being able to use a sociological lens and the “language” of sociology allows prospective teachers, as Tepperman (2010) suggests, to “label the real world so that we can foreground it for further discussion” (p. 2). Another aspect of understanding the real world is being able to see schools and school systems as examples of social structures.

A Beginning Understanding of Schools and School Systems as Examples of Social Structures

Social structures, as Wotherspoon (2009) points out, are “relatively enduring patterns of social organization” and they include such things as families, teams, workplaces, places of worship, and, of course, universities, schools, and school systems (p. 4). Life in schools and in other large organizations, such as universities, is complex with its myriad networks of people who interact with one another on a regular and often routine basis. People within these networks occupy different social positions or statuses and, as a result, they also play different roles within their respective institutions. It also

means that they possess different *kinds* and different *levels* of authority. For example, while the roles of teacher candidates share many similarities with the roles of their cooperating or associate teachers, teacher candidates exercise much less authority than their more experienced counterparts. School administrators, on the other hand, are responsible for the functioning of entire schools or school systems, so they exercise *more* authority than teachers. Looking more broadly, other people, from educational assistants and school trustees to support staff and even parents, are also a part of these vast networks, all enacting their own sets of roles and responsibilities.

An analysis of a typical classroom or a typical school, then, would show an intricate “web” of interactions between people of very different statuses and different levels of responsibility. The study of sociology makes this web of interactions more visible and more understandable to prospective teachers, along with a beginning understanding of some of the disparities that exist in any classroom.

An Awareness of the Racial, Ethnic, and Socio-economic Disparities that Exist in Society and in Schools

One of the first observations that pre-service teachers make when they begin their practice-teaching is the diversity of their students and the vast discrepancy in what those students bring to the classroom. They soon become aware that not all students come from backgrounds such as theirs and not all are privileged in the same ways. This is particularly important given the increasing diversity that is evident in almost all Canadian classrooms where it is quite common to see many different cultures and races represented. Some of those students speak English fluently but an increasing number are learning it as an additional language. Some of the students have experienced what it is like to live through war and, subsequently, have been traumatized in ways that most of us cannot imagine. These war-affected youth arrive at our doorsteps with little formal schooling, and often having experienced significant interruptions in any education they have had. Not only do these experiences present challenges for teachers in terms of their teaching of content, they also affect the degree to which these students are prepared to trust their teachers and get on with the business of learning.

When examining racial, ethnic, and socio-economic disparities, it is also important for beginning teachers to realize that, historically, not all minority groups have had the same degree of success with respect to educational attainment at both the K–12 and post-secondary levels.⁶ Although Asian-Canadian, African-Canadian and Aboriginal students can all be classified as ‘visible minorities,’ they have not experienced the same degree of success in Canadian schools. While some Asian-Canadian students have typically outperformed their Canadian-born counterparts, African-Canadian and Aboriginal students have historically experienced much less success at the K–12 level and they have had a significantly lower degree of participation in post-secondary education. It appears as though decades of oppression, segregation, and discrimination have had a significant impact on the ability of these students to be successful in the traditional school

⁶This is an example of how the disciplines of history and sociology can intersect in initial teacher education programs. Students can examine disparities as they exist and change across both *groups* and *time*.

system. Having said that, there are signs that these trends are gradually changing due to some innovative programming designed to meet the unique learning needs of these students.

Examining student diversity is important for beginning teachers in that it highlights that not all of their students will share the same enriching home experiences that they may have had, not all of their students will come from families that value formal education, and not all of their students will necessarily learn in the same ways that they learn. This means that from the outset they will need to develop a high degree of awareness and sensitivity to the diversity in their classrooms. They will need to learn new ways to reach immigrant and Aboriginal students, and resist the tendency to make assumptions about intelligence and potential based on unexamined observations or anecdotal comments about who is likely to succeed in school and who is not. This awareness and sensitivity will also prepare beginning teachers for critiquing current educational practice.

An Understanding of the Historical Context of our Educational Practices

Advocates have long maintained that foundations courses assist teachers in understanding the extent to which society impacts our schools. Whereas other courses can represent classroom life as stable and predictable, history reveals a complexity or messiness that is a more accurate picture of the realities of schooling. It has also been argued that historical study enables teachers to sharpen their thinking, to better situate their own experiences, and to distill their pedagogical strategies while broadening their “conceptual scope” and establishing a “range of possibilities for action” (Greene, 1973, p. 181).

Lucas has argued (1985) that without a “contextual” understanding of the student-teacher relationship teachers sadly become “akin to an automaton, performing by rote, and forever captive to methodology” (p. 10). Similarly, Giroux states (2005) that too often classroom life is presented to pre-service teachers as a “fundamentally one dimensional set of rules and regulative practices, rather than as a cultural terrain where a variety of interests and practices collide in a constant and often chaotic struggle for dominance” (p. 187). For Giroux, an antidote to the limitations of methods-focused teacher preparation programs includes expanding the role of history, in part to reveal the many “ways in which curricula and discipline-based texts have been constructed and read throughout different historical periods” (p. 192). It has been further argued that by examining past educational experiences, pre-service teachers can link socio-political conditions to educational structures and recognize that social conditions significantly affect families, as well as the reach of schools. By studying how specific programs arose, teachers can avoid muddled thinking and select more intelligent alternatives (Pietig, 1998; Soltis, 1990; Violas, 1990).

The Opportunity to Critique Current Educational Practice and the Gap that Sometimes Exists Between What We Say We Do and What We Actually Do in Schools

Probably one of the most important roles that history, philosophy, and sociology play is to provide prospective teachers with the tools to critique current educational practice. This means that beginning teachers come to understand that they need to be not just practitioners, but also scholars who develop the habits of mind for discerning what is effective in schooling, what is not effective, and when our rhetoric does not match what we actually accomplish. As Butin (2005, p. 209) suggests, “We want to foster productive habits of mind—rigorous attention to detail, critical questioning, respect for good data, and logical arguments.” He goes on to state that “the goal . . . is to enlarge our range of actions and thoughts. It is to help our students think carefully and critically about socially consequential, culturally saturated, politically volatile, and existentially defining issues within the sphere of education” (p. 218).

We would argue even further that—given that so many educational debates are ideologically based and, as a consequence, highly contested—it is crucial that beginning teachers have the opportunity to grapple with difficult questions that have no easy, pat answers. For example, which is better: whole language or phonics? Is there a place for failure in our classrooms or should all students be promoted with their social peers? How should teachers assess their students’ progress and is the use of grades still justifiable? These are examples of questions that are the subject of serious debate among educators and the general public, and they form an important component of the social context in which schooling takes place. We believe it is important for beginning teachers to be aware of and enter into these debates at the pre-service level so that once they begin their teaching careers they have a better understanding of the forces acting on their classrooms. With some luck, they will also be less likely to watch these debates from the sidelines.

An Informed Study of Teaching Requires a Critical Examination of the Theories upon which our Teaching is Premised

There are a range of things worth studying in preparation to be a teacher, such as developmental psychology, specific subjects and methods for teaching them, and classroom management. But none of these subjects of study ever gives exact prescriptions for what to do in specific situations that might arise in teaching. All of these subjects, like all of our personally-held beliefs about education, are based on theories about knowledge, how people learn and grow, what makes something valuable or the right course of action, and so on. They are based on such theories, regardless of whether the theories are apparent or not, regardless of whether the theories are very well-developed, or regardless of whether the theories are defensible.

Rather than learn about exact prescriptions for what to do in particular classroom situations, student teachers learn about general practices and broad principles—as well as about our best beliefs on such things as developmental abilities and stages—and they think through how to apply these to a variety of cases. Both the knowledge of such things as principles themselves, then, and our application of these to cases, depend upon our theoretical framework.

As Dewey noted, “Any theory and set of practices is dogmatic which is not based upon critical examination of its own underlying principles” (1938, p. 22). If we are to avoid the trap of dogmatism, then, and engage in a thoughtful application of theory and practice to our teaching situations, programs of teacher preparation must engage in an informed and critical examination of these theories. Such an examination is foundational in nature.

Concluding Comments

Becoming a teacher is not an easy task, but some familiarity with the disciplines of history, philosophy, and sociology provides beginning teachers with a frame of reference for better understanding their teaching practice, their students, and, of course, the human condition in general.⁷ In arguing for the social foundations of education as a necessary component of teacher education, we are not arguing for any particular means of structuring their study.⁸ We are not, for example, arguing that philosophy of education must be taught exclusively in courses dedicated specifically and exclusively to the discipline. In fact, many of the reasons we have given for teaching philosophy—or any foundational discipline—depend upon its relationship to other things that also need to be taught in teacher education programs, and it may well be that these are best taught together. Beyer (1989, p. 22) said as much when he warned against the “isolation of the educational encounter so that the sort of educational issues that are crucial in the foundations of education tend to be regarded as irrelevant or even counterproductive.” In the end, what we are arguing is that a strong and informed introduction to teaching must involve a critical examination of the sorts of matters we have discussed, for the reasons given, and are best done in a historically, philosophically, and sociologically informed manner.

If we are to sustain high standards in our educational goals, we must prepare our teachers with some introduction to the kinds of questions explored by the social foundations; if our educational goals are simply literacy as reading text, or following steps to answer mathematical questions, then it may be that teachers—and their students—are sufficiently served with some straightforward procedural knowledge about how to proceed in specific situations. The case for this would be strengthened if our classes were filled with a homogeneous population of willing students. But if we believe teachers have the responsibility to educate students from a wide diversity of backgrounds to become democratic citizens able to speak more than one language; who enjoy literature and appreciate other forms of artistic and cultural engagement; who engage in complex mathematical and scientific reasoning; and who can understand some of the major social and historical forces shaping their world and act on them, then teachers will need more

⁷ For a more developed discussion of the value of each of the disciplines to teaching and schooling generally, as well as a collection of case studies applying the disciplines to problematic issues in education, see Mandzuk and Hasinoff, forthcoming.

⁸ For a contemporary discussion of how philosophy of education is taught, see Chinnery et al, 2007. For an overview of the range of topics covered by the sociology of education, see Saha, 2008. For new approaches to teaching history of education, see Kolodny et al, 2009.

than a basic understanding of these things themselves. We have argued that an introduction to the social foundations of education is necessary to provide future teachers with some of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need.

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