

Assumptions at the Intersection of Philosophy and Policy

Heather Voke
Georgetown University

Sarah McGough reviews the major articles that deal with the concept of equality appearing in *Educational Theory* since *Brown vs Board*. Here, I will draw out a few assumptions that underlie her analysis. These assumptions point to some of the complex challenges that arise at the intersection of philosophy of education and education policy.

First, consider the language that McGough uses to discuss the multiple conceptions of equality. She identifies some conceptions as more fruitful and worthwhile than others. She describes one presented by Curran as reflective of a “valuable shift in understanding;” referring to one presented by Humphreys, she says it is “an obvious step back.” McGough does not say merely that conceptions of equality have changed over time and that her task is to draw out these changes; she attaches her evaluation of these conceptions and the changes they represent.

She seems to believe that there is some conception of equality against which we can evaluate those presented by the authors and which we can consult to determine whether those conceptions represent progress or regression. She also appears to believe that she has at least some rough understanding of this conception and that she knows how to use it to assess the conceptions presented by others. It may be that she is correct about all of these things. But even so, she has an obligation to let the reader know that she does believe these things, what her conception of equality is, and the reasons that lead her to believe that this conception is the correct one. Given her focus, disagreements between philosophers of education about the meaning of equality, it is peculiar that she is silent about her own conception of equality and the role it plays as a measure of those presented by others.

McGough also seems to believe that philosophical analysis of complex concepts such as equality is pretty straightforwardly useful to policymakers, that our theorizing about educational concepts can be used to develop education policies that move us closer to achieving equality through education. I do not think that this is an assumption we can safely make. McGough’s belief is expressed in statements about the use of analysis to move us forward in the “pressing task of eradicating problematic inequalities that linger within our schools”; referring to *No Child Left Behind*, she asserts that its elements must be “sufficiently theorized and their links to the aims of education elucidated,” again, presumably with the belief that this theorizing and elucidating would be useful in achieving equality. She expresses the belief that conceptual analysis would have been useful in the task of developing “philosophically informed policy” during the turmoil that followed the Brown decision and, at the end of her paper, she refers to the conceptual tools that have been and should continue to be developed in the pages of *Educational Theory*; again, here is an assumption that these conceptual tools are and would be useful to education policymakers.

We should not simply assume the utility of educational theorizing for education policymakers. Lindblom and Woodhouse in their classic text on the policymaking process confirm what many of us may have suspected: Policymakers do not pay a lot of attention to much of the work that we do in philosophy of education. Similarly, philosopher of education Tom Green, evaluating his experience with policymaking, voices his suspicions about the role of educational theorizing in the policymaking process: "I have become increasingly and reluctantly persuaded," he wrote, "that decisions of educational policy are practically never decided on grounds of educational theory."¹ Why it is that policymakers do not make more use of the tools we offer and our insightful and careful analyses of important concepts? Charles Lindblom and Edward Woodhouse nicely describe the exasperation that many theorists have experienced: "If humans are not forever doomed to live with relatively undemocratic and relatively unintelligent policy making, it makes sense to inquire systematically into what stands in the way."² What is it that interferes with application of education theory to develop possible solutions to problems in education?

If an argument is to prevail in the policy arena, as Green argues, it must have several characteristics, one of which is that it must be conclusive. It must also be compelling to individuals with very different perspectives and priorities, lend itself to expression in ordinary language, and it must be brief. Philosophical writing can rarely be characterized in this way; our arguments require careful and detailed (and sometimes lengthy) analysis as well as sophisticated and nuanced use of language. This is as it should be. While we could make some of our work more accessible, some things we think about, some issues in education are philosophically complicated and do require careful and lengthy analysis. McGough points to this in her analysis of the multiple and changeable notions of equality put forth by philosophers of education over the last fifty years. Yet, unfortunately, in the words of another pair of policy analysts (Edith Stokey and Richard Zeckhauser), this means that "many policy analyses are gathering dust [simply] because they are too long and too hard to understand"; analysis, they remind us, "is useless unless it can be communicated to others" and by others here, they mean policymakers.³

There is a second reason that the utility of philosophical analysis may be of limited use for policymakers which, again, should lead us to question the assumption of value of philosophy for education policy. One task of the philosopher is to be as clear and explicit as possible about the meaning of concepts. Yet clarity and specificity are often undesirable goals for education policymakers and we can't assume that if we could just be very clear and specific about the meaning of concepts such as equality, this would then compel policymakers to work together with one another to develop policies consistent with it.

For instance, as philosopher William Gallie has argued, some concepts are "essentially contested."⁴ When we examine the characteristic use of such concepts, we see that "there is no one clearly definable general use which can be set up as the correct or standard use."⁵ In the case of some concepts, "there are endless disputes, disputes that apparently cannot be resolved but which can be sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence."⁶ Many public policies in education do involve

essentially contested concepts. Think, for example, of democracy, a concept that has been subjected to considerable and ongoing debate by philosophers of education as well as political theorists. Other terms that come to mind are “opportunity” and, referring back to McGough’s paper, “equality.” If some concepts are essentially contested, clarity and precision about the meaning of these concepts may not be such a great thing in the policymaking arena. If those with an interest in a particular policy have widely differing understandings of equality or democracy, and if policymakers, with the aid of philosophers, are specific and clear about the meaning of the concepts relevant to particular pieces of legislation, they are unlikely to reach the consensus and formulate a policy that all parties can live with. Clarity and precision can undermine the possibility of achieving consensus.

In a recent article on the politics of *No Child Left Behind*, Andrew Rudalevige describes the Act as being simultaneously “numbingly detailed and comfortably vague.”⁷ Regulations about testing, accountability, and teacher qualifications in the law are very specific and incredibly detailed. However, the Act is astonishingly vague about the meaning of inequality, what it is exactly to be left behind, and where it is that we should be going in the first place. While this vagueness may be very disturbing to philosophers of education, it was essential to the development of a bipartisan coalition.

There are deep differences in how different groups involved in the policy making process understand equality just as there are in philosophy of education and these differences are not necessarily of the kind that can be remedied through careful philosophical discussion. The clarity and precision we demand of one another as philosophers may serve to highlight these differences and impede the development of policies that might, in the end, serve some of our disadvantaged children well. We cannot assume then, that the analysis of key concepts in education that we offer as philosophers would in fact be a useful and valuable contributions to the policymaking process.

1. Thomas Green, “Philosophy and Policy Studies,” in *Philosophy of Education Since Mid-Century*, ed. Jonas Soltis (New York: Teachers College Press, 1979), 92.

2. Charles E. Lindblom and Edward J. Woodhouse. *The Policy-Making Process* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), 3.

3. Edith Stokey and Richard Zeckhauser, *A Primer for Policy Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1978), 329.

4. W.B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” in *The Importance of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), 121-46.

5. *Ibid.*, 122.

6. *Ibid.*, 123.

7. Andrew Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” *Education Next* 3, no. 4 (2003): 1-9, 62-70.