

## Philosophy of Education: What's It Good For?

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In her article, Rachel Wahl enters into the growing body of literature about what recently has been termed “empirically engaged philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> This term is generally, but not always, applied to work in which someone who is trained in philosophy gathers empirical data, often through interviews and observations, and then interprets that data through a philosophical lens. In other words, some aspect of philosophy becomes the conceptual framework for the study and informs the analysis. This type of research also often seeks to advance a philosophical argument. For example, in Terri Wilson’s study of parents’ choices about school placement, she clarifies and deepens Dewey’s discussion of interests.<sup>2</sup>

Wahl makes the argument that interviewing people involved in an educational reform for the purpose of illuminating their “philosophical commitments” serves a public good. In part, this good comes from the interview itself, which engages the interviewee in a moment of reflection with another person about their commitments. This may help the participant come to new clarity about what he/she actually believes, in a space that is non-confrontational. Second, Wahl argues that this type of research serves the larger public, because, once published, readers may have access to the competing views that people hold and that may not otherwise be heard. This helps the public understand how people can hold competing views, potentially helping to illuminate public debates.

Beneath the surface of this argument is a question about what role philosophers should or could play in debates about educational policy. We get a glimpse of this in one of Wahl’s introductory questions. Wahl writes: “What hope is there for philosophers to deepen public dialogue on education in a period dominated by the call for evidence-based practice and the ‘gold standard’ of randomized controlled trials?” Wahl’s answer is that philosophers are well-suited to the particular type of qualitative research that she describes, which aims to illuminate competing values and promote mutual understanding.

I agree with Wahl that research that helps people to better understand one another is undeniably valuable, and I would add that lots of research aims to do this. I also agree with Wahl that philosophers may have a better eye for identifying moral reasoning and a better instinct for asking the types of questions that elicit responses that expose moral complexity. That said, when thinking about reforms, I do not think that philosophers have done enough to “deepen public dialogue” if their work describes the moral terrain without also helping the public to think through the relevant normative questions such as, “What does justice require, given our multiple and competing views?” Put differently, I am skeptical that fieldwork *is* philosophy, though I do think that fieldwork can be a component of philosophical work. In what follows, I discuss how we might enhance the philosopher’s role in the studies that Wahl uses as examples in her article.

Wahl grounds her article in a discussion of education reform. All reforms have an underlying normative claim, which is, essentially, “We should do this.” “This” might be the edTPA or it might be human rights education for police officers. In the edTPA case, Wahl juxtaposes the qualitative work she does with what she describes as the “dehumanizing” research that aims to understand what obstacles are interfering with the implementation of edTPA. One possible example of an obstacle could be that teachers fundamentally disagree with edTPA’s conception of a good education. If I am understanding this correctly, Wahl sees studies of implementation as problematic because they narrowly focus on a predetermined outcome, and any objections raised by, in this case, teacher educators need to be overcome. Wahl argues that it is more humane to conduct research that aims to bring out the competing views so that these unheard voices might contribute to a public discussion about whether this reform is worthwhile.

While I do not disagree that this would be valuable research, I think a philosopher should be able to do more than that. The philosopher could use extant research and interviews with teacher educators, student teachers, and edTPA trainers to argue that this is or is not a worthwhile reform. Alternatively, a philosopher might draw upon this data to ask, “Under what conditions is a teacher educator obligated to comply with a state mandate?” A philosopher might also make a normative argument for how teachers should be evaluated.

There are interesting parallels between this case and the police officer study. In this example, the reform aims to cultivate within police officers a commitment to protecting (or at least not violating) human rights. Like the teacher educators, Wahl finds that the police officers disagree with the aims of the human rights trainers, though they appear to learn so that they have access to the incentives given for completing the program. I can imagine an implementation study of these officers that tries to understand why they do not behave differently after the training and uses that information to get better compliance. From one point of view, this seems to be “dehumanizing” in the same way that the edTPA study is. That is, such a study would be “viewing [officers] as objects to be transformed rather than as people with whom one could be in conversation.” A philosopher should be able to sort out whether one, both, or neither of the implementation studies is “dehumanizing.” A philosopher could also ask whether all “training” (as opposed to education) is dehumanizing in some way. Using the interviews with the police, a philosopher might also be able to ask, “Under conditions of excessive corruption, should officers be expected to be protectors of human rights?” or “Under conditions of excessive corruption should officers receive some other type of training that would benefit the public good more?”

To be clear, I do not want to make the claim that philosophers should not be conducting the type of research that Wahl is promoting. I simply want to say that philosophers have more to contribute to public discourse than identifying the competing values within a particular issue. In fact, I believe it is our responsibility to say something about those values and to make claims. Members of the PES community are well aware that the way we go about evaluating values happens in all sorts of

ways. But let me just name a few of the ways philosophers can go beyond Wahl's perspective in the world of educational policy:

1. Make judgments about which values ought to take priority in particular circumstances.
2. Identify justifiable aims for education and education reforms — in ideal and non-ideal circumstances.
3. Make distinctions between terms that often go unexamined in public discourse.
4. Think about what justice (or right behavior) requires given the constraints people face in non-ideal conditions.
5. Question the normative assumptions within a reform.

And if we are humble enough to recognize our own limitations, we will realize that we are not likely to do these things well without talking to teachers, principals, superintendents, and policymakers. Nor will this work be good without reading and engaging in the relevant educational research. Some philosophers are inclined to do this empirical work themselves, but others will rely on the work of other researchers to help them sort through this complicated terrain. Indeed, what we find is that “empirically engaged philosophy” is acknowledging that the distinction between the philosophical and the empirical is somewhat artificial. On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Dewey's famous *Democracy and Education*, it is surely time for us to realize that philosophers need to be grounded in people's lived experiences. But we shouldn't limit ourselves to the distillations of opposing values that come out of that research. We need to keep doing what we have always done; we need to continue to make normative claims.

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1. Terri Wilson and Doris Santoro, “Philosophy Pursued Through Empirical Research: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (2015): 115-124.

2. Terri Wilson, “Exploring the Moral Complexity of School Choice: Philosophical Frameworks and Contributions,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (2015): 181-191.