

Ambitious Philosophy of Education: Non-ideal Theory, Justice, and Policy

Michele S. Moses

University of Colorado Boulder

It is important to me that I begin by saying what a significant honor it is to have read and provided feedback on the essays in this volume. Within the current sociopolitical climate of schools and schooling, I recognize more than ever the vital role that philosophy plays (*needs to play*) in education scholarship, research, policy, and practice. Without it, much education research is devoid of deep theoretical and conceptual grounding, which impoverishes the analyses and conclusions in irreparable ways. The essays included herein represent how the field of philosophy of education is expanding and diversifying perspectives and authorship, all the while remaining rooted in important philosophical questions and traditions.

In discussing ideas for the theme of the 2014 Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting, President Ken Howe suggested a focus on non-ideal theory. In the context of education in general, and philosophy of education in particular, non-ideal theory had not generated much specific discussion. It was certainly on the margins, mentioned by philosophers of education here and there, but had not been front and center even though distinguished philosophers such as Charles Mills, Elizabeth Anderson, and Alison Jaggar had examined it and used it in interesting and productive ways. The Call for Papers tried to entice philosophers of education to grapple with non-ideal theory, that is, philosophical work that carefully considers and takes into account the decidedly non-ideal sociopolitical contexts and circumstances present in the real world, characterized by unequal and unjust social structures. I hoped that we would receive submissions that lived up to what Howe has called *ambitious* non-ideal theory — that is, grounded in reality, but also trying to envision the world beyond the status quo, and how we might go about getting to more equitable and just education policies and practices. I was not disappointed.

The essays in this volume focus broadly on three areas (which certainly overlap and interact): (1) non-ideal theory and the examination of problems in educational theory and practice; (2) questions of educational justice related to race, gender, and class; and (3) education policy issues and how philosophical tools can be used in their analysis. Although I do not mention each essay and response in these introductory comments, I highlight a few representative essays in order to provide readers a sense of the flavor of the volume.

Because the first theme parallels the conference theme of “non-ideal theory and philosophy of education,” it is taken up specifically in the essays based on the Presidential Lecture and the Kneller Lecture. Howe challenges the received wisdom on educational equality, critiquing the premises of a meritocratic ideal that unquestioningly assesses “talent” without taking into account relevant environmental factors. Kneller lecturer Alison Jaggar engages our ideas of ideal and non-ideal

theory explicitly, in pursuit of real-world justice. Other authors take the challenge of the conference theme head on as well. Ann Chinnery, for one, examines the concept of moral luck, arguing that education has a central role to play in mitigating the non-ideal circumstance of “bad” luck. Terri Wilson and Matthew Ryg sketch a Deweyan conception of non-ideal autonomy, using it to reconsider debates about the proper scope of authority in education.

Bridging the topic of non-ideal theory with explorations about race, Winston Thompson examines the implications of John Rawls’s work for questions of race and education, which brings us to the second broad area of questions of educational justice related to race, gender, and class. The question of what it means for educators to have a commitment to antiracist education occupies PJ Nelsen as he uses Alain Locke’s pragmatist value theory as a lens to explore the emotions necessarily associated with such an endeavor. Similarly, President-elect Barbara Applebaum engages us with her arguments about how anger can be used productively in social justice education, especially in work with white students.

Finally, essays that fall into the third broad area, education policy issues and how philosophical tools can be used in their analysis, often engage issues of educational justice as well. This is exemplified by Victoria Theisen-Homer and Meira Levinson in their essay, as they address the importance of assessing the issue of justice for both teachers and students in the context of budget-driven teacher layoffs. Kristen Davidson also explores issues of justice as she seeks to provide guidance for school choice policymaking through her analysis of how parental decision-making processes within systems of school choice lead to increased school segregation and decreased educational opportunities. Taking on the topic of culturally responsive pedagogy in the context of teacher preparation standards that call for a focus on diversity, Huey-li Li makes the case that in order to foster reciprocal cultural interactions, advocates of culturally responsive pedagogy need to consider embracing ambiguities rather than essentializing identities.

Even when authors do not engage the ideas and concepts of non-ideal theory directly, the topics chosen and arguments made demonstrate how deeply philosophers of education are engaged in the world of schools and other educational institutions — theorizing about what to do in non-ideal social circumstances. As is always the case, many excellent essays may not fall under the theme, but are certain to elicit lively discussion of topics such as the concept of “child” in the work of Giorgio Agamben and Stanley Cavell; the convergence of the concepts of chance and crisis with critical thinking and criticality; and the use of feminist-poststructuralist perspectives to question standard approaches to qualitative research in education.

There is much more I could share about these fine essays, but suffice it to say that this volume holds significant contributions to philosophical thinking on a variety of issues, perhaps especially issues related to justice, race, and education policy. I hope readers will be stimulated and provoked in generative and thoughtful ways by the essays and responses herein.

I would like to thank a number of colleagues without whom the work on this volume either would not have succeeded at all, or certainly would not have been as thoughtful and polished as it is. I collaborated with the most wonderful and conscientious program committee members, listed as the Contributing Editors of this volume. I thank them with all my heart for their service and insights. I also worked closely with two Graduate Assistants, David Meens and Kevin Murray, both of whom were terrific to work with. I am grateful to my Dean, Lorrie Shepard, for supporting the Society by funding a Graduate Assistant as well as a course release for me during the busiest time. A special thank you to Ken Howe for recruiting me for this role and advising me throughout the process, Hospitality Chair Azadeh Osanloo, Executive Director Kurt Stenhagen, and Past Program Chair Cris Mayo, as well as Amy Shuffelton, Eduardo Duarte, Barb Stengel, Joyce Atkinson, and mc Anderson, all of whom gave great advice and helped put the program and Yearbook together in myriad ways.