

# **Philosophy of Education Interrogates what we Think we Know about Education**

*La filosofía de la educación interroga lo que  
creemos saber sobre la educación*

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Philosophy of education is a specialized area of educational inquiry which provides a unique perspective on educational policy, research and practice: that of the professional critic. This reflective stance has three characteristic features. First, it is foundational. It asks basic questions about the meaning, value and limits of knowledge. So, for example, a philosopher wonders not about how dyslexic children learn but investigates the criteria practitioners use to diagnose dyslexia. Second, it is humane. This interest in basic questions is not idle speculation and it does not relish scepticism. Philosophers think that understanding the world truthfully can help us sort out how to live well. An appreciation of the value of reading complements knowledge about how to teach reading. Only the former shows how we can use reading to enrich human beings' lives. Third, philosophy is promiscuous. All domains of knowledge are open to philosophical scrutiny. Philosophy of education's legitimacy as a branch of modern philosophy derives from being foundational, humane reflection brought to the domain of education.

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Philosophical activity, in this sense, pervades educationalists' work. Whenever a teacher wonders why he is teaching what he is teaching, whenever an educational scientist questions the validity of a methodological tool, whenever a committee member doubts the fairness of a policy proposal, philosophy is being done. Yet it is also true that, as an academic activity, philosophy is less a body of specialized knowledge within education than an interrogation of what we think we know about education. One does not learn philosophy. One learns to philosophize. So how can the philosophy of education, a specialized discipline with little specialized knowledge of its own, contribute to policy and practice?

Each of the several approaches that belong to contemporary educational philosophy makes a distinctive contribution to policy, research and practice. Some philosophers of education work as historians of ideas. They are concerned with how thinkers of the past shed light on contemporary problems in education. John Dewey, for instance, wrote extensively on the merits of community schools at a time, like now, when mass migration seemed to threaten social cohesion. Others philosophers of education are applied ethicists. Their writings speak to difficult social issues that involve young people's well-being and which often require a judicious response on the part of adults. The off-label use of medications to improve academic performance, the presence of open religious symbols in schools, and the sexualisation of children are some of these. Still others continue, in the tradition of conceptual analysis, to challenge the language of policy and practice in education. Is the idea of "learning to learn" coherent? What is positive about "positive" emotions and relationships? Language always leads educational discourse to some extent. But language can impede sound decision making when the thinking behind it is vague, ambiguous or incoherent. Lastly, some philosophers of education reflect on the educational sciences. Their enquiries typically focus on theory and methodology: the conceptualization of core constructs, the application and transfer of basic psychological research to education, the evaluative dimension inherent in the phenomena that educational scientists normally study (e.g., "effective" class management, "healthy" social development, "successful" adaptation), epistemological biases dictated by particular research methods, and so on.

The philosophy of education's distinctive contribution to practice, research and policy, then, resides less in its critical stance as such than in its professionalism. When informed, insightful, constructive and humane, the interrogation of what we think we know about education is valued in practice and policy circles. Yet the urgency of helping children learn, negotiating regulatory decisions, and acquiring new scientific knowledge often leaves little time for it. Educational philosophers are the only players in the field whose professional activities do not constrain such reflection. On the contrary, it is precisely their specialization to dwell on philosophical problems in education and to treat them with the sustained attention they deserve.