What Is "Philosophy of Education"?

Abstract Philosophy of education refers to the systematic process of understanding and explicating key concepts related to educational practice. Analytic philosophy of education is a contemporary approach to this task and is the technique used in this book to explain key educational concepts.

Over the years, many have been the committed educators and teachers I have met on the long highway of education who have said to me, "I am a practical person, I simply don't have a philosophical mind." The word "philosophy" frightens many people who believe that it requires special knowledge, it is ethereal and incomprehensible, and it focuses on the most abstract ideas and concepts of classical theories and thinkers.

In fact, "philosophy" and "the philosophy of education" refer to one of the oldest and most basic of human endeavors—thinking and pondering about basic and core ideas of life such as "How was life created?"?; "What is the right thing to do?"; "What does it mean to think about thinking?";

Adapted from Barry Chazan. *The Language of Jewish Education* (Hartmore House) 1978.

B. Chazan, *Principles and Pedagogies in Jewish Education*,

"How do we learn?"; and "What is death, why does it happen and what happens?"

From the earliest of human narratives, fables, and stories until the most recent of video games, children's books, and graphic novels, thinking about "big issues" is at the heart of the human condition. Indeed, it is not by accident that twentieth-century philosopher Gareth Mathews wrote books entitled *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Matthews 1980) and *The Philosophy of* Childhood (Matthews 1994) and that cognitive neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga published a book entitled, *The Ethical Brain.* (Gazzaniga 2009), and contemporary child psychologist Allison Gopnik wrote *The Philosophical Baby* (Gopnik 2009).

The term "philosophy" refers both to the categorial organization of the many diverse types of questions that we human beings ask and to the process of reflecting on these issues in organized and systematic ways. Thus, the term *metaphysics* is used to describe questions about the nature of being; *epistemology* refers to questions about how we know; *ethics (*or *axiology)* focuses on questions about what is right or wrong or good or bad; *logic* is the study of patterns and methodologies of rules of inference; and *aesthetics* reflects on the nature of beauty. There is also an organizational structure within philosophy, which utilizes the philosophic method to help us deal with professions or spheres of activity which are practical in nature such as medicine, law, or architecture. One of the most prominent forms of this category of philosophical method focused on practical activities is philosophy of education, which is the subject of this book.

One may well ask, "Why study philosophy?" One answer is that we brought this upon ourselves—as described in the philosophical book of Genesis—when the human obsession to eat from the forbidden tree of knowledge resulted in our being sentenced to exile ("east of Eden") and to wander forever seeking "to know". Seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes said in answer to the question "Why study philosophy?" that it was rooted in the nature of being human—we are *homo sapien*s—which he succinctly summarized as *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am.

A different answer suggests that thinking and philosophic reflection are connected to the idea of "wonder" or "radical amazement" (Heschel 1976)—the amazement that greets us when we wake up in the morning and see a sunny day or a smiling face or a child's query about how airplanes stay in the sky or why seesaws go up and down. Nineteenth-century English poet William Wordsworth suggested that philosophy begins with

children and that "the child is the father of man" (Wordsworth 2018) and twentieth-century Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai mused that "God has mercy on kindergarten children/but less and less as they grow/and on adults He has no mercy at all"! (Alter 2015).

Philosophy of Education in the Twentieth Century

The dominant practice to pursuing and teaching philosophy of education in twentieth-century American academic departments or schools of education typically fell into two categories. One category focused on the presentation and comparisons of diverse philosophies of education that developed over the ages. This category concentrated on specific theorists—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William James, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Nel Noddings (Reed and Jackson 2000)—and/or it organized diverse educational philosophies into distinctive categories (e.g., perennialism, essentialism; utilitarianism; constructivism; progressivism; existentialism). The purpose of these historical and comparative overviews was to help prospective educators understand diverse viewpoints about the theory and practice of teaching.

A second practice in teaching philosophy of education focused on instructors presenting an integrated normative philosophy which they regarded as reasonable, intelligent, and worthwhile for the practice of education. Perhaps the best examples of this practice were the remarkable courses on philosophy of education presented by John Dewey in the first half of the twentieth century at Teachers College, Columbia University, which were ultimately collected, transcribed, and edited by his students and emerged as a profound book on democracy and education (Dewey 1997). Dewey utilized the tools of philosophy to weave together and present an integrated convincing educational philosophy to guide young, and not-so-young, educators through their work in schools. I was to discover a third approach to philosophy of education—the analytic approach—by traveling on highways between New York-Boston-New York!

A Road Taken

Many decades ago, as I began to pursue travels on the road to a career in philosophy of education, my journey took me on New York to Cambridge, Massachusetts. to meet with a shaping figure of twentieth-century philosophy of education, Israel Scheffler of The Harvard Graduate School of

Education. Scheffler, along with British colleague R. S. Peters, had become the central figures in shaping a new and different approach to the study and teaching of philosophy of education called "the analytic" or "linguistic" philosophy of education (Scheffler 1960; Jonas Soltis 1978). They did not aim to preach what the goals of education *should* be, what we *should* teach, or advocate or how we *should* teach, but instead they focused on the way we *talk* about education.

The assumptions of analytic philosophy of education are: (1) words matter and precision in the use of words in educational discourse matters a lot; (2) much of the discussion of "education" is confused and unclear because there is no consensus or agreement on such core educational terms as "teaching", "learning", and "knowing. If educators could arrive at some shared agreement and clarity about such words, it would greatly facilitate discussion and minimize confusion. (3) It is necessary to clarify and analyze diverse types of educational terms which include stipulative, programmatic, and descriptive definitions in order to understand what the speaker's intention is in using the words he or she uses. The analytic philosopher of education wants to understand the distinctions between such phrases as "knowing how", "knowing that", "thinking that", and "thinking about". What is the difference between knowing that there are 50 states of the United States as compared to knowing how to swim? What is the difference between teaching that George Washington was the first President of the United States and teaching someone how to think? The assumption of this approach is that words often express diverse meanings, and through an analysis of common language we might be able to understand diverse usages, meanings, and ultimately practices in teaching, learning, and education.

Therefore, rather than focusing on the promulgation of normative or ideological theories of education, the analytic philosopher of education clarifies the way words are used in education, based on the belief that many of the confusions about education are linguistic rather than ideological. The intention of this approach is not to preach a particular or personal vision, but rather to improve the clarity and mutual agreement of core terms in educational discussion.

I Came for a Visit and Stayed for a Lifetime

That visit at Longfellow Hall in Cambridge was to lead me to Dodge Hall at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York where I become a disciple of one of Israel Scheffler's prime students, named Jonas Soltis. The methodology of Scheffler and Soltis seemed to me to make a lot of sense and to be extremely useful in practice. I cared deeply about education, I wanted to make a difference, and I wanted to know what I could do to make a difference. My teachers taught me that I could potentially make a contribution to education by improving the way we talk about it. What was needed was not more sermons from on high, but clear, understandable, and agreed-upon language so as to enable reflective practitioners to shape the course of their practice.

So off I went to be an analytic philosopher of education—and indeed much of my work discussed in the coming chapters reflects this approach to clearer talking and thinking. This method was to guide my work in the world of education at diverse universities, in a variety of countries, and in multiple roles. I came to realize that a certain percentage (sometimes a great percentage) of the confusion about education was not about intrinsic issues but of a linguistic nature. This approach to educational language coalesced with my ongoing engagement with and love of words in poetry and literature (Oz & Oz-Salzberger 2014). My academic roots in Cambridge, Massachusetts and in the Upper West Side of New York led me to many venues, from New York to Jerusalem to Caracas to Melbourne to London, and to other stops in between, where my concern was to try to facilitate clear discussions of the language of education.

Applying the Method

This book comes to apply the linguistic methodology to issues dealing with the meaning of the word "education" in general education and Jewish education. The assumption explicit in my approach is the belief that one can only understand the specific term "Jewish education" within the broader context of the general term "education". At the same time, we must take into account that the term "Jewish education" refers to a specific and sometimes quite different kind of education, which has a long and laudatory tradition of its own.

Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of this book deal with the analysis of general educational concepts, while Chaps. 6, 7, 8, and 9 focus on educational concepts specific to Jewish education. My intent is not to present a history

of philosophy of Jewish education nor of general education but to help us understand how to talk about and, hopefully, implement education in a clear and cogent manner.

The Road Not Taken

Has the twentieth-century linguistic analytic approach played a role in contemporary Jewish education? The answer is short and—for those who see value in the analytical approach—not sweet. I believe it is fair to say that the analytic approach has had little influence on contemporary Jewish education.[1] This is not to say that twentieth-century Jewish education was neglectful of the philosophy of Jewish education nor that distinguished philosophers did not make use of aspects of analytical thinking. Indeed, twentieth-century American Jewish education has been enriched by the writings of a group of significant normative philosophers of Judaism who in various ways referred to Jewish education. German-Israeli philosopher Martin Buber wrote a series of significant essays on education and national education (Buber 1947). While Abraham Joshua Heschel's writings focused mainly on Jewish theology, he did, in various contexts, comment on issues related to Jewish education (Heschel 1966). Mordechai Kaplan devoted two chapters of his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization,* to theoretical and practical issues related to Jewish education (Kaplan 2010). One of the most prominent voices of contemporary Jewish thinking, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson ("The Lubavitcher Rebbe") is perhaps the most prolific writer on the role of education in life, in general, and in Jewish life in particular in his many decades of teaching, speeches, and writings (Solomon 2000; Wexler et al. 2019; Solomon 2020). It should also be noted that contemporary Jewish academics rooted in philosophy of education such as Hanan Alexander (Alexander 2001, 2012, 2015), Jon Levisohn (2005, 2009, 2013), and Michael Rosenak (1987, 1995) have made important contributions to the field.

On the Road

Now that I have framed an approach that I believe has much to contribute to Jewish education, in the next chapters I will apply this approach to a series of core questions I have heard in many places and in many venues on this exciting highway.

NOTE

1. B Chazan "Analytic Philosophy of Education; the road not taken" in. H. Miller, L. Grant and A. Pomson, editors. *International; Handbook of Jewish Education*. (Springer) 11–28.

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