

Critical reflections on teacher education: Why future teachers need Educational Philosophy

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Critical reflections on teacher education: Why future teachers need Educational Philosophy

by Howard Woodhouse

Routledge, 2023, 150 pages

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Once considered to be a foundational discipline of university Education programs, Philosophy of Education has been increasingly marginalized over the last 25 years. As Woodhouse describes, with some exceptions, new hires in the discipline have dwindled, removing it from many universities over the years by way of gradual attrition. For Woodhouse, under the value program of the global economy, the knowledge that education programs disseminate is increasingly being understood as a commodity of the marketplace instead of being something that is freely shared for the sake of emancipating persons. Furthermore, this value program dictates that education must attain measurable results whose criteria are purely market-based (e.g., perceived workforce needs; heightening national economic competitiveness; performance-based funding; differentiated tuition costs, etc.), which has contributed to the endangerment of the discipline of Philosophy of Education, a domain of study that asks critical questions about the nature and purposes of education and which is poised to reveal the undue influences of values that are foreign to it.

With reference to the Life-Value Onto-Axiology of the late John McMurtry, Woodhouse argues that the life-oriented values of education and the money-oriented values of the global marketplace are contradictory to one another. As such, it is no wonder that market forces have chiseled away at the discipline of Philosophy of Education. It is a domain of intellectual study that can help teachers to cultivate the kind of mindful reflective space, out of which they can both develop resistances to the external pressures that they may face in their professional careers and formulate pedagogical paths forward that have the interests of students authentically in mind.

As the value program of the global economy continues to undermine the life-oriented values that help to preserve the civil commons (including public education, public health care, and biospheric well-being, etc.), Woodhouse suggests that teachers are under increasing pressure to understand their work as “technicians in an assembly-line system that rewards compliance rather than relevantly qualified judgment” (p. 2). Under this rubric, the values of the market are further being employed to select, in pre-determined fashion, what or who students should be or become, what they should strive for, what roles in society they should perform, what to think and what to believe, what to enjoy, as well as the existential meaning of their lives. This ideological money-based agenda is being emphasized in Education to the neglect of the pursuit of the intellectual emancipation of students which enables self-determination and sees to the expansion of their life-ranges in terms of their capacities for thought, feeling, and action. Philosophy of Education chiefly promotes a critical engagement of teachers and prospective teachers with conceptual frameworks surrounding education. This engagement typically increases their capacities to discover and to “implement pedagogical approaches that address the felt needs and longing of students for reliable meaning” (p. 2).

Woodhouse presents his argument in three distinct parts: First, he outlines the case for the notion that the money-oriented values of the global economy have undermined the life-oriented values that belong implicitly to education. Second, Woodhouse takes up the humanistic educational philosophy of Bertrand Russell which emphasizes teachers cultivating “a spirit of reverence” for the process of organic growth. It is this respectful, appreciative, and nurturing orientation in relation to life that is the ground for the trust that students require if they are to learn from their teachers. In contrast, ideological concerns that are assumed without the possibility of their being questioned, such as

those stemming from the value program of the global economy, and that force themselves into the interactions of teachers and students, destroy this trust.

Third, Woodhouse discusses several “hopeful” developments in relation to a prospective restitution for the Philosophy of Education. One of these is the general success of the *Philosophy for Children* (P4C) movement of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp. P4C employs storytelling that appeals to the imagination of children and promotes critical discussions that foster the cultivation of wisdom. Another area is the urgent need for climate education in light of the onset of the global ecological crisis, which largely has to do with the continued destruction of our environmental “life-host” by human beings, whose habits of action have become informed, in an entrenched manner, by the value program of the marketplace. A third related avenue wherein hope may be found is recent emphases on the importance of land-based Indigenous knowledge. For Woodhouse, the “hope” that is presented by such avenues is not a naïve one. Rather, it is one that is implicitly aware that it may very well fail.

Interspersed with his arguments, Woodhouse reflects on some of his own experiences as teacher educator. These anecdotes point to the profound struggle that has constituted a great deal of the substance of his professional life—as being caught up with critical questioning in relation to the influence of the money-code of value on education. They humanize his formal arguments, concretizing them for the reader.

The premises of Woodhouse’s arguments for the restitution of Philosophy of Education can be said to be supportive of the alternative thesis that the purpose of formal education, going forward, should not only entail the *dissemination of knowledge*, as is typically described in the foundational documents of Western post-secondary institutions, but also the *cultivation of wisdom*, in relation to the application of knowledge. Arguably, it is the dissemination of knowledge without an adequate attention to the manners in which that knowledge is applied that has contributed greatly to the contemporary situation of global ecological crisis.

In reading this volume one comes away asking: How ever could teachers assist their students to cultivate wisdom without some exposure to the discipline of Philosophy of Education or to some related domain of inquiry? Given the urgent life and death stakes that Woodhouse demonstrates are involved in relation to decision-making concerning the shape that formal education will take going forward into the future, this book is essential reading for all existing and prospective teacher educators and administrators.