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Philosophers of Education Respond to the Dominance of Empiricism in Educational Research

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Educational research is contested terrain, too often succumbing to narrow conceptions of what constitutes legitimate ways of knowing. However, most educational research methods textbooks and syllabi convey the notion that the only debate occurs within empirical research: the choice between qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods.

This special issue responds to some of the most significant ways in which philosophy of education is marginalized: research methods courses, the textbooks often used in those courses, and the resulting dominance of the assumption that educational research means empirical research. Contributors from three continents and four countries show that philosophy of education can contribute to debates about the nature of educational research and how it can be made more rigorous and thoughtful. These essays illuminate how a more robust and substantial conception of educational research emerges when philosophy of education is included as a viable option.

Many of these contributions arose in response to an inaugural preconference held at the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society conference in Toronto in spring 2023. Big thanks to the executive of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society and to the many participants in that event.

In “But What Should I Do in my Methodology Chapter? Promoting Philosophy as Legitimate Educational Research,” I argue that the dominant assumption that educational research means empirical research narrows the range of possibilities for educational research. I begin by exploring the problem of “tacit empiricism,” the assumption that educational research means empirical research, which I explore in several educational research methods textbooks and course syllabi. I then argue that there is a close link between one’s conception of education and the selection of the most appropriate method to study it; research method and conception of education align. I lament that the proliferation of qualitative methods has not translated into inclusion of philosophy as a legitimate way to do educational research. I critique the assumption of empirical studies that data gets us closer to what is “really going on” in schools, whereas philosophy is construed as second-order removed and a barrier between the researcher and the object of research. I respond to this problematic but prevalent notion by suggesting that theory actually helps bring us closer to “what is,” which leads into a discussion of what a philosophical method might look like. I suggest that the requirement that educational research have a practical impact, based on a limited notion of what counts as evidence, is a key reason why philosophy of education is marginalized. I then argue that it is important to rethink the word “research” itself so that it includes reading, writing and thinking, and conclude by suggesting practical ways in which philosophy of education can be promoted in the face of these challenges.

In “With Friends Like These...: Research Methods and the Marginalization of Philosophy,” Deron Boyles considers how and why humanities research is excluded, co-opted, or othered in methods courses and methods course offerings for education research at an R1 institution. Boyles notes that concerns have also been raised by philosophers of education that philosophy is not taught or is rarely taught as a research method in colleges of education. He asks why humanities methods are rare in an R1 education research core and suggests a major cause is “scholarly turf wars” (p. 219) waged within the politics of inquiry. To that end, Boyles provides a brief overview of the history and politics of the methods wars, an explanation of a research core and the courses constituting it at Georgia State University, and a view from the outside looking in: peering over the qual and quant gate to see that philosophy is already there, but denied credibility, acknowledgement, and understanding.

Naomi Hodgson notes that the demand for rigor and relevance, in a narrow and limited sense, has led the field of educational research to attempt to prove its scientific credentials, especially in relation to being useful for policy and practice. This focus on rigor and relevance has led to “a heightened concern with methodology, to the extent that a form of methodolatry has developed” (p. 235). She notes that many philosophers of education critique the empiricism that dominates educational research, and the resulting exclusion of “questions of value and meaning” (p. 239). Wider changes in the governance of research makes educational research vulnerable to an a-disciplinarity that overlooks distinct features of the subject it investigates. Hodgson suggests that an anthropologically informed educational philosophy may help address this dominance and point towards opportunities for the contributions of philosophy of education to be made apparent.

In “Philosophy of Education After the Golden Years,” Liz Jackson puts the issue of the marginalization of philosophy of education by empiricism in a historical context, “historicizing our sense of the field and the formation of subjectivity within it, rather than looking at the situation only from within this particular moment in time” (p. 244). Jackson explores how philosophy of education is framed to students as outside “normal” educational research, and why students as initiate scholars might not choose to study it. She examines the discourse of “precarity” within the field: philosophy of education as conscious of and reflective about its own marginality, especially within the larger context of educational scholarship. Jackson identifies the prevalence of empiricist and data-oriented views about research that lead students not to appreciate what philosophical approaches to educational research might offer. She examines what it means to be “in danger,” who “we” are, and how such questions have shaped the field over time.

Finally, in “Philosophical Approaches in Educational Research,” Ilya Zrudlo proposes several ideas about how “the profile of philosophical research in education could be raised, to demonstrate that it is legitimate and genuinely productive to engage in non-empirical research in education” (p. 255). He identifies four different ways of engaging in philosophical research in education: conceptual analysis, hermeneutics, the philosophy of educational content, and the philosophy of quantitative analysis. Zrudlo concludes by identifying three strategies for researchers in the field: doctoral training, teacher education, and interdisciplinary or generalist research efforts in education. Together these contribute to strategies for rethinking how best to address the dominance of empiricism in educational research.

It is hoped that these essays may promote a greater awareness of the problematic implications of the dominance of empiricism among educational researchers in general and philosophers of education in particular, a deeper understanding the causes and consequences of this dynamic, and some specific guidelines and strategies that might help mitigate its negative effects.