

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Educational foundation studies, Mary Olga McKenna begins, at least as recognized by the Canadian Association of Foundations of Education, are comprised of several fields, including philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, and comparative education.¹ McKenna's study was confined to philosophy of education,² "an area," she reports, that "until recently had been neglected in Canada."³ McKenna focused on the "present status of philosophy of education in the curricula of initial teacher preparation programs in Canada."⁴ Her study was designed specifically to find out what "presently passes for philosophy of education in Canadian teacher education institutions and the extent to which it is perceived by teacher educators as necessary for the initial preparation of classroom teachers."⁵ That the philosophy of education is "multifaceted," McKenna suggests, is corroborated by the "great variety of labels used to designate it as a subject of study in the curricula of preservice programs."⁶ Reviewing "course titles and descriptions," McKenna classified the courses listed under the caption of "Philosophy of Education" into "three broad categories: historical, normative, and analytic."⁷

Approximately 12% of coursework McKenna found to be "historical," among these "Philosophy of Education" (Brandon), "History of Educational Thought" (Alberta), or "History of Educational Ideas" (Mount Allison).⁸ Such coursework "required disciplined grasp of the thought of the major educational theorists in the western world and the implications of their theories for educational practice."⁹ Not quite 20% of the courses listed in university calendars McKenna considered "analytical in nature."¹⁰ The point of these was to "initiate students into the activity of philosophizing about education"; consequently "high priority" was accorded "analytic technique."¹¹ Course descriptions promised "analysis" of "concepts," including "education," "teaching," "authority," and "freedom," emphasizing analysis of the "logic" employed in "justificatory arguments."¹²

Approximately 70% of course offerings McKenna interpreted as "normative in nature," as they promised studies of "contemporary theories of education and their applications to educational settings."¹³ Philosophy of education was treated as an "educational discipline, prescriptive in nature, which provided a set of principles which would serve as guides in coping with the ever-present immediate practical problems in the educational society whether they were at the level of the classroom, the school, the system, the province, the nation, or the world."¹⁴

McKenna reports that "[a]ll 44 teacher education institutions reported that studies in educational foundations were available in all preservice programs for the preparation of elementary and secondary school teachers," and, of those, "42 stated that a foundations of education component was compulsory."¹⁵ McKenna found that "philosophy of education tended to be a required constituent of initial programs in the

Atlantic provinces, one of the options in a compulsory educational foundations course in the Western provinces.”¹⁶ In Quebec, philosophy of education was “usually” one segment within a compulsory foundations course; in Ontario, approximately “half the institutions required philosophy of education as a separate subject; the other half offered it as one option in an educational foundations requirement.”¹⁷ In summary, while no central educational authority in Canada designates philosophy of education as a required subject in the professional year leading to initial certification, “all teacher education institutions offer it in their preservice programs in one form or another,” its status compulsory, optional, or elective, and taking from one-third of a course to a full course.¹⁸

“By and large,” McKenna concludes, “there was a sense that the importance of philosophy of education was proportional to the desire to have educated people function as teachers, as opposed to merely trained people,” adding: “Thus, philosophy of education was defended in the curricula of teacher preparation programs because of what it can do for the prospective teacher as a person and as a professional.”¹⁹ Emphasizing the point, McKenna notes that

Compulsory status as a separate discipline and/or as part of a general foundations course was preferred by those who held firmly to the ideal of a curriculum which would prepare teachers who were educated persons, not merely trained instructors; an optional status was supported by those whose proposed curriculum was designed to train teachers who would be immediately effective classroom performers.²⁰

Indeed: “there was no doubt in the minds of the respondents about the relevancy of philosophy of education for the preparation of classroom teachers both in its analytic and prescriptive roles.”²¹ Where there *was* “considerable difference of opinion” concerned “how it could be made relevant to the theoretical and practical components of the preservice teacher education programs.”²²

McKenna draws three conclusions: (1) as an element in the curricula of preservice teacher education programs in Canada, philosophy of education is “alive and well” (in contrast to the situation in the United States); (2) teacher educators in Canada affirm the “value of philosophy of education for the personal and professional preparation of teachers and are committed to its inclusion in preservice programs”;²³ (3) philosophers of education in education faculties recognize they must collaborate with colleagues in “assisting student-teachers to bridge the gap between the theoretical and practical aspects of the program.”²⁴ Indeed, McKenna found evidence that “attempts were being made in a number of institutions to relate philosophy more immediately to practical classroom problems.”²⁵

COMMENTARY

McKenna's forty-year-old finding – that philosophy of education is alive and well in preservice teacher education programs in Canada – holds true today, at least at the University of British Columbia (Ruitenbergh 2010, 2015, 2017), including its intersections with teacher education and curriculum theory (Phelan 2015, Clark and Phelan 2017, Phelan et al. 2020). In contrast to the United States, in 1981 almost all of the departments, faculties, and colleges of education had institutionalized philosophy of education within their teacher education curricula. That allusion to the United States may also hold true today, as UBC was able to recruit one of the most promising of America's philosophers of education, Samuel D. Rocha (2015, 2017, 2020).

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ McKenna 1981, 43.
- ² For a study of philosophy K-12, see research brief #53. Philosophy of education is also referenced in research briefs #22 and #53.
- ³ McKenna 1981, 43.
- ⁴ McKenna 1981, 43.
- ⁵ McKenna 1981, 43.
- ⁶ McKenna 1981, 44.
- ⁷ McKenna 1981, 44.
- ⁸ McKenna 1981, 44.
- ⁹ McKenna 1981, 44.
- ¹⁰ McKenna 1981, 44.
- ¹¹ McKenna 1981, 44.
- ¹² McKenna 1981, 44.
- ¹³ McKenna 1981, 45. Curious that McKenna uses the term “application” apparently unselfconsciously, as it was already being questioned in curriculum theory. Aoki, for instance, considers the concept “naively unproblematic” (2005 [1987], 152) as it “reflects [the] will to master, to control and to manipulate” (2005 [1987], 153), and is split-off from “understanding,” which Aoki deems “hermeneutic problem” (2005 [1987], 154).
- ¹⁴ McKenna 1981, 45.
- ¹⁵ McKenna 1981, 46.
- ¹⁶ McKenna 1981, 47.

¹⁷ McKenna 1981, 47.

¹⁸ McKenna 1981, 47-48.

¹⁹ McKenna 1981, 48.

²⁰ McKenna 1981, 51.

²¹ McKenna 1981, 52.

²² McKenna 1981, 52.

²³ McKenna 1981, 52-53.

²⁴ McKenna 1981, 53.

²⁵ McKenna 1981, 53. Aoki (2005 [1983], 116) regarded “theory and practice” to be “in a dialectical unity.” That “unity” is “praxis,” a concept – drawing upon Aristotle – Aoki conceived of it as “a holistic activity of the whole person – head, heart, and lifestyle, all as one – given to an ethical life within a political context” (Ibid.). “To understand ‘praxis’ in the contemporary sense,” Aoki added, “it is well to be reminded of Paulo Freire who remarked, ‘praxis is reflection (thought) and action (practice) upon the world in order to transform it’” (Ibid.)