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Ilya Zrudlo

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Résumé de l'article

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Philosophical Approaches in Educational Research

ILYA ZRUDLO
Université du Québec à Montréal

This paper suggests ways in which 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. I begin with some historical context for philosophical research in education, exploring the approach known as "conceptual analysis" as it was practiced some decades ago. I then identify four different ways of engaging in philosophical research in education today, namely, (1) a contemporary version of conceptual analysis, (2) a hermeneutic approach, (3) the philosophy of educational content, and (4) the philosophy of quantitative methodologies. I conclude by identifying three practical strategies for graduate students and researchers in the field, which touch on doctoral training, teacher education, and interdisciplinary or generalist research efforts in education.

I remember early in my PhD programme telling an engineer that my dissertation was in the area of philosophy of education. He blinked a few times and asked, "But what research do you do?" "Well," I tried to explain, "it's philosophical in nature, so it involves a lot of reading and writing, analyzing concepts, and so on." A bit of silence. "But," he repeated, "what research do you actually do?" Readers of this journal are no doubt familiar with such scenes, even in interactions with other educational researchers. For most people, including many scholars in education, research means empirical research. The phrase "theoretical work" thus has little meaning. Armed with scientific methods, it is assumed, we can bypass endless and fruitless theoretical debates, and instead focus on discovering "what works."

No need to rehearse here in detail the issues with such a scientistic view of research and how easily insidious ideologies and questionable assumptions can infiltrate the research process and shape results, under the radar, when this view predominates. I take it for granted that readers of this journal are convinced that we cannot simply bypass analysis of concepts, assumptions, and theories in educational research. My purpose here is instead a positive one: to suggest ways to raise the profile of philosophical research in education—to demonstrate that it is legitimate and genuinely productive to engage in non-empirical research. I begin with some historical context, go on to outline four different ways in which philosophy can be mobilized in educational research, and conclude with three practical suggestions and tactics for graduate students and researchers in the field.

A Burst of Philosophical Research in Education

There are a few times and places to which one could point where philosophical research in education flourished. One of these was in the 1960s and 70s in the United Kingdom, where the so-called "London school" of philosophy of education developed. Sometimes called "conceptual analysis," the approach involved careful analysis of concepts current in educational discourse, (allegedly) relying on ordinary language to clarify confusions. The approach has limitations, to which I turn in the next section, but it is worth illustrating it briefly before doing so.

For example, educators and others often call for education to focus on the "interests" of children. But what do we mean by "interest" here? Paul Hirst and Richard Peters (1970), two of the leading figures of the London school, pointed out that the appeal to the interests of children "sounds down to earth because of its psychological flavour and its attempt to deal with the all-pervading problem of motivation in education" (p. 33). But the term is surrounded by ambiguity. First, we can speak of *what is in the interest of* a child, but also of *what a child is interested in*. Learning mathematics may be in the interest of a child, but the child may not be interested in mathematics. Educators usually have the latter, "psychological" concept of interest in mind when they talk about the need to focus on the interests of children. Hirst and Peters continue:

> In what sense could education be based on interests in this [psychological] sense? Could such interests determine the *content* of education? Hardly—for children have many interests that are educationally undesirable—e.g., blowing up frogs with bicycle pumps.[1] Their interests, too, at an early age tend to be sporadic and evanescent. Sustaining interest is perhaps a greater educational problem than appealing to it. One of the most important things a child has to learn when he is young is to complete tasks that he has begun. Unless he learns to do this he may develop a promiscuous attitude towards activities, a tendency to give them up when their initial appeal fades and when difficulties are encountered. He may tend to live only in the present and develop into a person who falls in with the modern cult of instancy. There is also the empirical point that most of children's interests are socially acquired. They get them from their parents, from other children, and from the mass media. If the teacher does nothing to encourage interest in what is worthwhile he is simply opting out of his responsibility and abandoning children to get their interests from other sources which may be antipathetic to education. (p. 37)

Hirst and Peters thus conclude that interests in this sense cannot determine the content of education. Children's interests may be relevant, however, for determining *methods* in education. One might, for instance, use children's existing interests as a kind of bridge towards helping them become interested in the subjects to be taught. A child may be interested in shopping, for example, and a teacher might use this interest to *interest* them in learning mathematics. "But this," Hirst and Peters go on, "raises the crucial motivational question of what it is about educationally important activities which is motivationally potent. What features of them lead children to get interested in them for their own sake?" (p. 38). This brings us back to the content of education, and the importance of discerning what motivationally attractive features of this content can be emphasized with children of different ages, in order to foster interest in them.

The concept of "interest" is just one among many that received the careful attention of the London school philosophers of education. Others include "creativity" (White, 1972), the idea of teaching students to "be critical" (Passmore, 1972), "needs" (Dearden, 1972), "emotion" (Pitcher, 1972), "teaching" (Hirst, 1974), "learning" (Hamlyn, 1973), and "motivation" (Peters, 1981). Many other concepts and terms could also be mentioned, fruitful analyses of which have been conducted. The next section explores some of

[1] This example has a 1970s flavour. Today, of course, the games and media promoted among young people by commercial propaganda come more readily to mind, especially in light of the remainder of this passage.

the ways in which conceptual analysis continues to be used today, some critiques of it, as well as three other fruitful ways of mobilizing philosophy in educational research.

Four Ways of Mobilizing Philosophy in Educational Research

So-called conceptual analysis, or something akin to it, remains an important method or approach in philosophical research in education. Robin Barrow (2020) has been an avid champion of this approach, but it has also been taken up more recently by other scholars, sometimes as a main approach, at other times complementing other approaches—but not always named as such. For example, Kristján Kristjánsson (2010), in the context of a larger discussion about the self and emotion, includes a brief conceptual analysis of the term "self-esteem"—a term that had not yet become popular in the heyday of the London school, but which has since become nearly ubiquitous. He points out that the term self-esteem did not have a home in ordinary language until recently; it is a construct imported into popular discourse from psychology. When we map out the different ways in which we now use the ideas of low and high self-esteem, we see that the term is used to describe many different things. People who are shy, self-deprecating, humble, meek, mild, self-effacing, diffident, might all be categorized as "having low self-esteem," while people who are confident, smug, arrogant, big-headed, enthusiastic, outgoing, friendly, and so on, might be labeled as "having high self-esteem." The labels low and high self-esteem appear to blur some relatively important distinctions. To be humble is not the same thing as to be diffident, and confidence is not the same as arrogance. As Kristjánsson puts it, the "general complaint here is that 'global self-esteem' is a banal construct which obscures our rich ordinary-language repertoire of self-evaluation concepts" (p. 106).

Another example of conceptual analysis would be Claudia Ruitenberg's (2019) critique of "competency discourse" in Canada. She argues, in the pages of this journal and drawing on earlier work by Barrow (1987), that competency discourse is a contemporary form of "skill talk"—reducing an entire range of different educational aims (virtues, capacities, attitudes, conceptual understanding, etc.) to the narrow box of skills. We have effectively substituted competency for skill, but without changing the underlying concept very much. Conceptual analysis, then, remains an important approach for conducting philosophical research in education, even today, and there are many ways in which it can be deployed—almost unlimited, because there are so many key terms (and slogans) in educational discourse.

In 1983, Peters wrote a short retrospective on the approach to conceptual analysis in philosophy of education that he had helped develop over the previous decades. He admitted that, in general, the approach "tended to be too self-contained an exercise" (p. 43). Not "enough attention," he suggested, had been "paid to the historical or social background and view of human nature which [the usage of a term] presupposes" (p. 43). So-called ordinary language, it had been found, was not as free-standing and objective as had been thought. In fact, the "ordinary language" from which Peters and others had drawn, like any language, was shaped by certain assumptions—in this case by assumptions common among upper-middle-class British men of the time. What Peters eventually came to argue is that conceptual analysis typically cannot stand alone. I would agree and suggest that conceptual analysis needs to be modified or complemented by what might be called a hermeneutic approach.

A hermeneutic approach, as I conceive of it, emphasizes a keener perception of history and culture. A wider sense of philosophy comes into view—wider than mid-late-twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy in any case. From this perspective, one can analyze concepts such as self-esteem in new ways; for example, to investigate where it comes from, how and why it became popular, what features of North American culture made the concept particularly popular there, how it might inadvertently shape young people's self-perception in undesirable ways, and so on. Will Storr (2018), for instance, in his book *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed*, tracks the story of how self-esteem became a buzzword in California through the popularization of humanistic psychology and how a particular politician took on the propagation of the self-esteem gospel as a personal crusade. His self-esteem taskforce distorted the

scientific research with which it was provided and ran a vigorous public relations campaign across the country and beyond to promote their baseless promises about the effectiveness of boosting self-esteem as a kind of social vaccine. Moving beyond these interesting historical facts, the popularity of self-esteem as a concept is also related to features of the culture in the West. The work of Charles Taylor (1989) on the affirmation of ordinary life, the positive and optimistic side of Romanticism, and above all the modern internalization of the moral sources on which we rely helps explain how the idea of self-esteem came to seem so natural and self-evident in the Western context. A hermeneutic approach, by emphasizing history and culture, helps us make sense of the moral sensibilities and convictions that allow certain educational terms, such as self-esteem, to become so attractive and eventually ubiquitous. We could thus call the hermeneutic method a second approach to engaging in non-empirical research in education.

A third approach might be called the philosophy of educational content. While the bulk of the content taught in schools should rightly be informed by content specialists—for example, what is taught in history class needs to be informed by the work of historians—in the context of each discipline, there is value, usually acknowledged by content specialists themselves, in imparting some "philosophy of" the discipline in question, especially as one moves further into high school and certainly in tertiary education. Students of history should, for example, gradually acquire some basic knowledge of philosophy of history as they progress in their studies. Even at the primary level, while there would be no explicit instruction in the philosophy of history, the content inevitably expresses some philosophical perspective of history. Relatedly, most disciplines also have certain key concepts that give them structure and are foundational to its workings. For example, the concepts of structure and function are key in biology, and a good education in biology gradually provides students with a deeper understanding of these two concepts, among many others. Philosophers of education who are familiar with these concepts, perhaps because they also work in philosophy of biology, are in a good position to help inform educational content in this area. Finally, there are also normative questions associated with the selection of content to teach. History is an important example of this, though it can be asked for all disciplines: What *ought* students to learn of history, or any given discipline, during their years of mandatory schooling? This is not a question that can be answered through empirical research, as Peters and other London school philosophers had emphasized. Bringing out these different points should help address the dominant assumption that research in education necessarily means empirical research. As examples of research in what I have called the philosophy of educational content, see Matthews (2020) and Zrudlo (2022).

A fourth way in which philosophers can carry out educational research is to investigate the statistical methods often utilized in data-driven research. There are, these days, rather fundamental questions being asked about the nature of social-scientific research that relies on quantitative methods: How should significance be measured and interpreted (Amrhein et al., 2019)? Why is so little research in the social sciences replicable (Wiliam, 2022)? Philosophy's relevance here is clear. This is another way in which we can analyze research on, for example, self-esteem, so much of which relies on rather questionable uses of statistics. This depends, of course, on our own familiarity with what philosophers of science have been writing about statistics over the past several decades (e.g., Meehl, 1967). It seems Bayesian critiques of frequentist approaches (e.g., approaches that test a null hypothesis, which are very popular in educational research) are particularly attractive, for example (Sprenger & Hartmann, 2019). This approach to philosophy in educational research might be termed the philosophy of quantitative methodologies.

Conceptual analysis, hermeneutics, the philosophy of educational content, and the philosophy of quantitative methodologies, then, are four ways of conducting philosophical research in education. There are no doubt other approaches and areas (such as non-empirical phenomenology), and even other, different ways of categorizing the four approaches presented here, which are, of course, in no way mutually exclusive or contradictory. One should also note how these approaches could draw on many different areas of philosophy: epistemology, philosophy of science, ethics and moral philosophy, philosophy of language, philosophy of history, political theory, and so on. In fact, philosophy of education involves nearly all areas of philosophy. This testifies to the immense complexity of the field of

education, and its productivity as a field of inquiry for philosophers. I hope the relevance of these philosophical approaches to educational practice is also clear.

Practical Tactics and Strategies

The 2023 preconference of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society, during which some of the ideas in the present paper were discussed, emphasized the idea of tactics and strategies: concrete ways in which philosophical approaches to educational research could be promoted. I have three practical suggestions, pertaining to doctoral training, teacher education, and interdisciplinary or generalist efforts in educational research.

When I was a doctoral student in a department of education, I had few required courses. Given that graduate students entering this PhD programme come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds (sociology, history, statistics, psychology, philosophy, etc.) and/or professional experiences (teaching, educational administration, etc.), it is difficult to foster a single, coherent conversation among them. Nevertheless, everyone was required to take at least one methods course, chosen from among a short list of quantitative and qualitative course offerings. Neither seemed to apply to my own project, which would be philosophical in nature. In my mind, I had resigned myself to having to take a largely irrelevant course (I had already taken introductory quantitative and qualitative methods courses during my master's programme in education, and it seemed like the content would be similar), but my supervisor suggested another possibility. He explained that I might be able to develop an independent reading course in collaboration with him on the topic of philosophical methods in educational research, which we could argue would replace the required methods course.

I ended up making the case to my department that, because I was envisioning a philosophical dissertation project, it would be better for me to do a reading course in philosophical methods in educational research, under the direction of my supervisor, who had graciously agreed to take on the task. Given my supervisor's consent, the department agreed to make the substitution. In the context of the course, I was able to draft a paper on a philosophical approach to educational research, which was subsequently published (Zrudlo, 2021). I thus realized that one's doctoral programme can in fact be adjusted in a more philosophical direction, regardless of the empirical nature of required methods courses or the lack of more philosophical options. This is one "tactic" that graduate students in education, as well as professors on the supervising end, may wish to explore. If we want to nurture the capacity of an increasing number of researchers in education who are familiar with philosophical methods, we will need to give them appropriate training in those methods through graduate courses, and perhaps for now some of these courses will need to be informally put together. This tactic, of course, depends on willing advisors.

Another area in which the profile of philosophical methods in educational research can be raised is in teacher education. Professors in departments or schools of education—among which most philosophers of education can be found—are after all directly involved in delivering the programme of study through which the vast majority of students must go in order to be able to teach. In some cases (unfortunately fewer and fewer cases—less than 10% across programmes in Canada according to Maxwell et al., 2023), teachers must take at least one philosophy of education course. In other cases, there are certain courses that, while not explicitly an introduction to the philosophy of education, could introduce some of the philosophical approaches mentioned above. Peters (1977) himself had in fact suggested that, at least at the level of initial teacher education, it might be better to "mesh-in" philosophy of education with other foundational disciplines, rather than having a distinct philosophy of education course. There are no doubt many opportunities for the introduction of philosophical perspectives. For example, one could introduce some insights from the philosophy of quantitative methodologies in a course that presents evidence-based practices—in order to better understand the nature of the "evidence." General courses that touch on ethics and education, or values and education, or society and education, could also

be contexts in which to introduce some hermeneutical approaches.[2] In addition, there might be ways for enterprising philosophers of education to become involved in teacher education in the context of ongoing professional development.[3]

One valuable starting point, at least in my experience, is to help teachers realize that many of the terms that circulate in the broader discourse on education, as well as in specific institutions, carry normative implications for students: they paint a picture of the ideal kind of person we hope our students will become (Zrudlo, 2021). Evoking the notion of citizenship, for example, implies that there is a kind of citizen we are trying to help our students become. The idea of "critical thinking" implies some kind of "critical thinker" that we hope our students will aspire to become. Emphasizing self-esteem usually assumes that it is important for students to have a "high" level, and that we will endeavour to make this happen. All these terms, and many others, enable certain ways of being and discourage others. If this is agreed upon, at a basic level, we should naturally ask ourselves certain pointed questions about these terms—questions that lend themselves to conceptual and hermeneutic analyses. Does the use of a given term in educational discourse and practice cohere with how it is deployed in other contexts, including ordinary language? Where does that term come from, when did we start using it—what is its history? What is the cultural or conceptual background that endows this term with meaning and significance?

Regardless of the way in which they are exposed to these ideas, the point is that if teachers themselves are brought to see the relevance of philosophy of education to their practice and their navigation of the discourse on education (see also Woodhouse, 2023), they will increasingly demand it, therefore fuelling research in philosophy of education. Anecdotally, I have found that teachers are quite receptive to accessible analyses and critiques of certain terms that are current in educational discourse. For example, a paper of mine on the concept of "learning styles" (Zrudlo, 2023) has been enjoyed by several teachers who have found it helpful to read the philosophical analysis of the term, its origins, and the reasons why it is so popular, despite being a neuromyth with no empirical backing.

An implication here, which is worth highlighting, is that the profile of philosophical research in education will be raised in teachers' minds *if* such research, or at least a major part of it, speaks to their concerns, dilemmas, and questions—in the real, contemporary field of discourse and practice. Relevance is, to be sure, only one criterion. There is value in "untimely" research as well—one thinks naturally of Nietzsche's untimely meditations (e.g., Nietzsche, 1874/1980)—and it may be, in fact, that "untimely" research is the *most* relevant, if it can be brought alive to teachers. But the point is that, if we want people, and especially teachers, to respect non-empirical, philosophical research in education, we had better produce research that serves contemporary practice. This does not mean we should not pursue our own projects, which may be further removed from current concerns; it only means that, as we do so, we should make room for analyzing contemporary practice as well. For example, the highly questionable term "21st-century skills" is immensely popular in educational discourse globally and has been for many years. But there is a paucity of philosophical analyses of the term, and none (to my knowledge) that are easily accessible to teachers. Many similar gaps in the philosophy of education research could be identified; there are many low-hanging fruit, so to speak. There is no reason why there should not be a good set of philosophical articles on every major slogan out there in the discourse on education.

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[2] I hasten to add that these tactics and strategies are of course piecemeal and insufficient by themselves. I am only suggesting them as one part of the wider campaign to raise the profile of philosophical research in education, and not as the key to, say, (re)integrating philosophy into teacher education, which is a related though distinct endeavour (but to which I am likewise committed). By their nature, these tactics and strategies depend a great deal on the initiative of individual instructors and their familiarity with the discipline of philosophy of education, as well as other external factors, such as the extent to which teacher education programmes are already over-loaded, etc. Thank you to one of the reviewers for reminding me of this point.

[3] Similarly to the previous footnote, this strategy is vulnerable. Individual professors might incur costs by going out of their way to become involved in the professional development of teachers (if this takes them away from producing research to be published in academic journals). Nevertheless, it is one more avenue for raising the profile of philosophical research in education.

My third practical suggestion pertains to interdisciplinary or generalist research efforts in education. Given that education is more of a field of practice than a discipline *per se*,[4] educational research has the typical incoherent mix of theories and methodologies, issuing from the so-called foundational disciplines (history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology) as well as newer or interdisciplinary approaches. Some philosophers are wary of entering this chaotic arena, and, like some of their colleagues issuing from other disciplines, prefer to conduct their own research: read primarily within philosophy, write philosophical articles and books, and talk to other philosophers of education. Such research is, of course, valuable and should continue. However, there is also great value, particularly in a field such as education, in crossing disciplinary boundaries. Doing so, I argue, can also raise the profile of philosophical research in education.

What this requires, in the first instance, is becoming at least somewhat familiar with the seminal educational research conducted by historians, sociologists, psychologists, and others, as well as some of the more recent trends. It is hard to speak to other researchers in education when one has no notion of their foundational reference points, or what they are currently talking about. And it is worth pointing out that the most celebrated historians, sociologists, psychologists, and other scholars of education are often also familiar, to a degree, with philosophy—enough to draw from it and engage with it intelligently. I need not dwell on the dangers associated with overspecialization; they are even more pronounced in a field as complex as education. To completely ignore major developments and trends in areas of educational research outside of philosophy is a recipe for isolation, irrelevance, and impoverishment.

Armed with a basic familiarity with the breadth of educational research, one can better discuss and collaborate with colleagues—conversations that will in turn enhance one's breadth of knowledge of the field. Many possibilities exist for collaboration and joint projects. Joining empirical research projects to offer to the process one's insights as a philosopher, while not directly raising the profile of non-empirical philosophical research in education, could help our colleagues appreciate the contribution of philosophy, and thus indirectly strengthen its position in educational research (see Peters & White, 1973, for insights into how philosophers can cooperate with other researchers in education). We might also join with others to do non-empirical, more theoretical and conceptual work. In my own experience, scholars from other disciplines are often eager to engage in such work, sometimes lacking within their own sub-fields, and their concerns, questions, and perspectives can provide fertile springboards for philosophical reflection.

The question of publication venues is also relevant here. There are several good outlets through which philosophers of education can get their work out to other philosophers of education—this journal included. Such journals fulfill an important function. However, they are not the best venues for reaching broader audiences of educational researchers or practitioners in the field. If non-empirical research by philosophers of education rarely appears in generalist journals in the field of education, it will naturally decrease in importance in others' minds. Of course, the generalist journals themselves are partially responsible for this problem: in some cases, their own bias against philosophical methods and the value of non-empirical research presents a considerable obstacle. But there are ways around this obstacle. Most generalist journals are, in principle, open to theoretical or conceptual pieces. They need to be written differently than articles in philosophy of education journals—for example, they need a literature review, a theoretical framework section, and so on—and fitting non-empirical research into these moulds may be awkward, but it is possible. I have done so myself (e.g., Zrudlo, 2023). Sometimes a shift in terms helps; for example, instead of "hermeneutics," one might speak of "interpretive social science" (Bevik & Blakely, 2019). Good philosophy has been and can be done in accessible terms.

[4] In other words, an "educationist" does not designate an individual with a particular set of academic skills, methods, or knowledge. We have teachers who are professionals in the practical field of education. And we have philosophers of education, historians of education, educational psychologists, sociologists of education, and so on, who bring their disciplinary expertise (in philosophy, history, etc.) to the study of the field of education.

Conclusion

The four proposed ways in which philosophical research in education can be conducted, and the three specific tactics I outlined above, suggest several practical questions for philosophers of education who wish to contribute to this process: How do we keep abreast of the terms circulating among educational researchers and in the broader discourse on education, and the ways in which they are used? How do we carry out convincing and accessible analyses of the use of these terms, their histories, and their enabling frameworks? If we are not particularly well-versed in statistics, how do we develop enough familiarity to allow us to intelligently question certain methods in quantitative educational research? Who might we collaborate with, and in which venues could we present our work in order to reach a broader audience? The field of education is in dire need of conceptual clarity, and many philosophers of education are in a good position to offer insights.

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About the Author

Ilya Zrudlo (zrudlo.ilya@uqam.ca) is a professor in the Department of Education and Pedagogy at l'Université du Québec à Montréal. He pursues two broad research programmes, one in the area of youth and community development and the other in teacher education. His ORCiD profile can be found at https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7787-9226