

Recovering the Lost *Métier* of Philosophy of Education? Reflections on Educational Thought, Policy and Practice in the UK and Farther Afield

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*A Special Issue of the Journal of Philosophy of Education in November 2012 explored key aspects of the relationship between philosophy of education and educational policy in the UK. The contributions were generally critical of policy developments in recent decades, highlighting important shortcomings and arguing for more philosophically coherent approaches to educational policy-making. This article begins by focusing on what the contributions to the Special Issue—particularly two of them—have to say about the relationship between philosophy of education and educational policymaking. It then goes on to argue that this relationship can best be understood through an exploration of education as a practice in its own right (as distinct from a subordinate practice). Such an exploration seeks to shed light on the proper *métier* of philosophy of education. In the course of the exploration the kind of thinking predominant in recent international patterns in educational policy is contrasted with a different kind of thinking which has yielded rich gains in Finland. Important distinctions are drawn between the inherent and extrinsic benefits of educational practice and between the internal and external politics of practice. These contribute to the articulation of philosophy of education as a distinctive discipline of thought and action which is necessary to the work of practitioners and policymakers alike.*

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY

The Special Issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* devoted to an analysis of educational policy and policy-making in the UK (Vol. 46, No.

4, 2012, edited by Richard Smith (2012b)) makes revealing if not cheerful reading. The editorial and twelve articles provide a telling account of the conquest and colonisation by government policymakers of a domain that previously enjoyed a large measure of independence. But life doesn't stop in conquered lands. The contributions to the Special Issue reveal some of the many ways in which, during the quarter-century since the Education Reform Act of 1988, educational thought and practice in the UK have had to learn to march to a different drum. (It should be pointed out from the start that Scotland is an exception in important respects. This is also becoming increasingly true of Wales and Northern Ireland.)

A wealth of insight over a wide range of policy themes emerges from these articles. The themes include: innovation (Naomi Hodgson), faith-based education (Michael Hand), teaching 'methods' (Andrew Davis), teacher education (Alis Oancea and Janet Orchard), assessment (Gerard Lum), vocational and civic education (Christopher Winch), and cherry-picking policy from other countries (Carrie Winstanley). Three articles are included on policy reforms in higher education (Sophie Ward, Elizabeth Staddon and Paul Standish, Richard Smith). A closing article on lessons to be learned is provided by W. A. Hart. It would not be possible to do justice to the significance of each of the contributions within the scope of a journal article. Here I propose, rather, to explore a larger question which underlies the specific concerns of the individual contributions. That larger question concerns the nature of the relationship between philosophy of education on the one hand and educational policy and practice on the other. The opening article by John White (White, 2012) deals centrally with the philosophy-policy relationship, as does the three-page editorial by Richard Smith, so I'll take these as my main points of reference in beginning the exploration.

The first part of John White's essay furnishes a succinct historical account of how philosophy of education in the UK, in his words, lost its *métier*. He traces a story of rise and fall from the 1960s to the present, with 1985 marking an important turning point. White points out that, during the rise of the philosophy of education from the 1960s onward, engagement with educational policy issues was central to how most within the discipline understood and practised their work. Educational policy in this connection, he adds, was not exclusively the preserve of government. There were many opportunities for philosophy of education to influence decisions among head teachers and inspectors, as many former students gained such posts (White, 2012, pp. 504–5).

White explains that criticisms of the theoretical emphasis of philosophy of education in initial teacher education programmes were growing by the late 1970s and that philosophy of education began to wane as a central field of study for student teachers. But the Thatcher government's withdrawal of funding for the fees charged to teachers for in-service courses was a more serious blow to the subject, in his view. The advent of the National Curriculum and its associated prescriptions in 1988 'began to move policy-making upwards from school to central government level, with teachers increasingly becoming implementers of decisions made elsewhere rather than policy-makers in their own right' (p. 506). Although the field con-

tinued to shrink, White argues that the post-1988 policy regime still provided philosophy of education with plenty of material for philosophical critique. This now increasingly became critique of centralised policy initiatives and of the centralisation of policy itself.

But policy-related concerns in philosophy of education have waned in the last two decades, White argues, not least because the ‘internationalisation’ of the subject has led to increasing ‘pressure to publish work of trans-national interest’ (p. 507). He sees much of this latter work as ‘inward looking’ rather than engaging with live educational concerns. He also views it as advancing the policy goals of international journal publishers, as distinct from the concerns of teachers and philosophers of education working in ‘a policy-relevant environment’. White concludes his arguments on the ‘lost *métier*’, and the first half of his essay, with a hopeful glance to the future:

I look forward to the day when teachers are given more time and resources for their own professional education, as well as more freedom and power to help shape what their schools offer. Philosophy of education will then, at last, resume its former role (p. 507).

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS: SOME TENSIONS

Freedom of the kind that White would like to see teachers regain was systematically removed from them by successive waves of educational reform internationally over the last quarter-century. As we shall consider later in this article, however, there is also evidence in a small number of countries of *increases* in that freedom. This evidence indicates a quite different rationale for educational policymaking from that which has come to prevail in England and, *in varying degrees*, most other Anglophone countries. Making such a rationale explicit and coherent would help in promoting a more fruitful relationship between philosophy and policy in education. With this aim in view, the perspective I wish to introduce in this article—mainly in the next section—is that of regarding education as *a practice in its own right*. Something of such a perspective is already evident in occasional remarks by White, like the one quoted above about teachers being ‘policy-makers in their own right’. Similarly, when referring to the period between the 1960s and 1988, White observes: ‘Decision-making about aims and curricula was left to schools themselves. *Each had its own policy on this*’ (p. 504, emphasis in original). Speaking of ‘student-teachers, serving teachers, college lecturers, teachers of college lecturers’ during that era he writes: ‘All were aware of the transformation in education that was taking place and most, perhaps, saw themselves as willing participants in it’ (ibid.).

A comment by Richard Smith in the opening paragraph of his editorial (Smith, 2012a), and developed as a theme in the following three pages, is also suggestive of the idea that public education might properly be

considered a practice in its own right. Although granting that ‘education as a public activity is inescapably political’, Smith declares that ‘the thought that it would be good to keep politics out of education from time to time holds its attractions’ (p. iii).

At first sight the notion of a practice in its own right may suggest that practitioners would enjoy unhindered scope to decide both the aims and the conduct of the practice. Political interventions in the practice might thus be deemed improper. It is clear that neither White nor Smith advocate this unqualified kind of autonomy. Neither would I. However, I am keen to make more explicit the intimations present in the contributions of both White and Smith that education as a practice may have inherent goals of its own. If it has, then the practice needs at least some recognised degree of autonomy. White argues that ‘[T]here is no case for returning to the pre-1988 days and leaving school curricula entirely in the hands of teachers’ (p. 514). He holds that the kinds of aims that inform the curriculum derive mainly from political considerations. Such aims ‘will . . . have much to do with the kind of lives we hope individuals will be leading in the future, in the kind of society of which they are co-citizens.’ And he concludes:

Teachers have no more right than shop assistants or physiotherapists to have a privileged voice on this matter. It is a political topic, one on which every member of our democracy should have an equal voice. This speaks in favour of some kind of political control of school aims (p. 514).

White is quick to add however that this control should extend only to the main framework for a curriculum. Where more specific and detailed aims are concerned he sees a necessity to allow scope for professional decision-making. The educational practitioners (teachers, school principals, school guidance counsellors) would presumably take charge of the more specific aims, and the politicians would remain responsible for the curriculum framework, including any changes to it. In his more recent articulation of an aims-based curriculum (Reiss and White, 2013), White recommends ‘some kind of commission, protected from political meddling, to act as a trustee for a defensible national curriculum’ (p. 48). The reference here to protection from political meddling indicates something like an independent or statutory curriculum council, different models of which now exist in many Western countries. It is unclear if White would go this far, as he maintains that ‘the state should decide the most general aims and the more general sub-aims that fall under them’ (p. 49).

Richard Smith’s opening paragraph in his editorial, from which I’ve already quoted the concluding words, strikes a quite similar note to White’s. It raises doubts and questions about the possibility, even the appropriateness, of education as a practice in its own right. Here is the paragraph in full:

Education as a public activity is inescapably political. There are different and competing views about what constitutes the good life,

about human nature, about justice and equality, about what is worth learning and why, and about the purposes of education in relation to these. Accordingly it is entirely proper in a democracy that education policy should be created by the people's elected representatives in parliament, even if the thought that it would be good to keep politics out of education from time to time holds its attractions (p. iii).

Anyone who holds, as I do, that education should be acknowledged as a practice in its own right must feel some sense of reservation in reading the statements I've quoted from White and Smith. Yet the democratic tenor of these remarks must raise a question about what reasons there could be for any reservation. The main reason comes more clearly into view when one places the two statements I've quoted alongside a similar-sounding statement in a 2008 article by Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector for England and Wales (Woodhead, 2008). The article was written on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Recalling the immediate aftermath to the passing of the act Woodhead writes:

Naturally, most teachers were deeply suspicious. They dismissed the idea of a national curriculum to be defined by politicians as an intrusion into their professional domain. . . . My reaction was more positive. The basic logic seemed right to me. Why shouldn't parliament set out what it expected the nation's children to be taught? . . . The devil, as always, would be in the detail, but there was nothing here that was not good management practice. Tell people what you want them to do, give them the resources and space to get on with it and hold them accountable. I hoped, too, that a national curriculum would mean a national entitlement to study a broad range of subjects, ending what can only be called the eccentricity of local provision in many schools (Woodhead, 2008, np).

Woodhead is more specific than White or Smith in stating where the essential decision-making powers in education should lie. It is clear that for him there can be no question of public education being a practice with substantial scope to determine its own aims and to regulate its own affairs. Making explicit the intimations in both White's and Smith's remarks would, I believe, draw out some important contrasts between their positions and Woodhead's. For Woodhead however, teachers must be told what to do by a higher body—namely, parliament. In practice this means the Minister for Education and the bodies acting on the Minister's behalf. If Woodhead's view is accepted, there is no meaningful sense in which public education is a practice in its own right. Accordingly, those who carry it out are to be seen more as underlings, or functionaries, than as practitioners. It is clear that the thrust of White's and Smith's thoughts push in a contrary direction to this. But disagreeing with Woodhead gets one only so far. One needs to show further how education is in key respects more than an 'essentially contested' arena where things are ultimately, or more promptly, arranged to the design of the stronger party. For this very reason the proper

relation of the political to the educational needs to be further clarified. White's keenness to place some constraints on government's powers in education is evident in his remarks on government control over 'the main framework' only. But the shape and scope of such a framework need further exploration: what functions and powers it includes and what it doesn't, what voices carry influence within it, how it relates to practitioners and to the public, and so on.

This necessity for further exploration is underlined by the reasons Smith advances for being attracted by 'the thought that it would be good to keep politics out of education'. These reasons are: an increasing cynicism among the public about the motives of politicians; increased policy-borrowing from other countries—which is explored in detail in Carrie Winstanley's article in the Special Issue; a dismantling of former checks and balances in the distribution and exercise of power; policy decisions that are influenced by Ministers jockeying for advantage within their political party; policy decisions that are influenced by manoeuvrings for lucrative positions by Ministers, their advisors and associates (pp. iii–iv).

Bearing in mind this complex background I propose, in the next section, to examine more closely the notion of public education as a practice in its own right. The section after that will briefly review an instance of how such a practice might be productively pursued and the final section will then offer some fresh reflections on the relationships of philosophy and educational policy and practice.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AS A PRACTICE IN ITS OWN RIGHT

In recent decades the notions of 'a practice' and 'the practical' have received much philosophical attention, mainly through renewed scholarly interest in some of the key ideas in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1969). Such ideas include *praxis*, which on an Aristotelian account is a reflective form of action informed by the painstaking deliberative reasoning called *phronesis* (*Nic.Ethics*, Bk.6, 1140a-b.) A second key form of action identified by Aristotle is *poiesis* (making or crafting), informed by a more instrumental reasoning: *technē*. (*Nic.Ethics*, Bk. 6, 1140a. See also W. Carr, 1987, 2005; Dunne, 1993). Drawing substantially on this Aristotelian background Alasdair MacIntyre has highlighted the distinctions between a practice and other form of human activity in his book *After Virtue* (1985, 2nd edn.). To avoid misunderstanding here it should be emphasised that the notion of a practice—as employed by MacIntyre and many other philosophers—must not be confused with some everyday uses of the word practice (e.g. 'getting nuclear fusion to work in practice would be a major advance'; 'there was a practice of vote-rigging in some constituencies; the laws were clear, but were often ignored in practice').

MacIntyre's elucidations have highlighted the distinctiveness of anything deserving the name 'a practice', thus demarcating a practice from other forms of human activity. His investigations have also served to illuminate the connections between a practice and the related notion of

practitioner. For Aristotle, *praxis* was the characteristic activity of the *polis*: that public arena where informed, justifiable actions were deliberated upon and pursued in order to achieve the goods of the *polis* as a whole. By extension, other less public or more specialised arenas could have forms of *praxis* suited to their own goods; for instance, home-making (*oikonomia*), medicine, shipbuilding and other arts. These latter examples provide a recognisable path to MacIntyre's noted definition of a practice, the indefinite article having a particular importance in this connection:

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (1985, p. 187).

MacIntyre's distinction between the internal and external goods of a practice is a decisive one. It illustrates that the values of a practice (its virtues, to use MacIntyre's term) arise chiefly from its internal goods; a point that is centrally important for our later discussion of education as a practice. But to take a concrete example: central to the *internal* goods of medicine are the competent diagnosis and treatment of illness, the promotion of improved standards of health, the development of its own practitioners' capabilities. The external goods include the high earnings, the high social standing and the high regard of the public often associated with the practice of medicine. Such external goods could of course be achieved by other means. This example helps to show that it would be a mistake to associate internal goods with pursuing a practice 'for its own sake', particularly if by the term 'for its own sake' one means some kind of self-absorption that excludes the core benefits of the practice—for both its clients and its practitioners.

Equally decisive are two other points arising from MacIntyre's definition: firstly, his demonstration that if a practice is 'in good order' it reveals a coherence in its internal goods; secondly, his illustrations that such coherence allows the practice to define and to extend its own standards of excellence. I should stress again that this does not mean that the practice must operate with absolute autonomy. A practice 'in good order' remains critically attentive to the needs of the clients or the public which it serves. It also remains responsible to that public, but for benefits that are genuinely those of the practice itself, as distinct from extrinsic goals imposed on it by politicians or others.

In addition to clarifying important differences between a practice and other forms of action MacIntyre's arguments here throw an important light on the reasons for engaging in a practice. For instance such engagement could be more for the external rewards of the practice (money, social prestige etc.) than for its inherent benefits, or *vice versa*. It could also be for some combination of both. Or one might wish to pursue the inherent

benefits but might be coerced to give pride of place to other benefits that can more readily be captured by the measurement instruments of performance management systems.

Pursuing some important implications for education of MacIntyre's arguments, Joseph Dunne (2005) has pointed out that the inherent goods of education as a practice include benefits like the following for engaged learners: 'release from the tyranny of the ego, . . . release from a vacant present, . . . the achievement of competencies that are ones of the whole person' (p. 155). Such benefits, Dunne has illustrated, are available across a wide range of school subjects, from the more 'practical' to the more 'academic'. They are achieved through participation in a learning environment which has been made hospitable to them through the sustained efforts and 'conversational' capabilities of teachers.

Following this current of thinking further, educational practice becomes disclosed not as a single form of action but as a diverse yet recognisable family of practices. As well as differing in their pedagogical approaches, these practices range from infancy through childhood and adolescence to the various stages of adulthood. What makes the practices a family is their common commitment to uncovering the potentials that are most native to each person, and to nourishing these in carefully cultivated learning environments. Far from privileging the values of one or other party or interest group, such environments acknowledge from the start the plurality of human experience and aptitude. The actions of practitioners here seek to promote learning practices which are cooperative, venturesome and mutually respectful; which are also as democratic as they can be, given the age and levels of maturity of the participants. Different rationales for such an orientation toward educational practice can be found in writings like those of John Dewey (1997), Jerome Bruner (1974) and Lawrence Stenhouse (1985), though none of them use the phrase 'a practice in its own right'. The philosophical origins for this kind of ethical-pedagogical orientation however—at least in Western civilisations—predate MacIntyre, and even Aristotle. Their *locus classicus* lies in the educational activities of Socrates, as depicted in the early dialogues of Plato.

Observed at closer range, the inherent benefits of educational practice include things like the following, to mention just a sample: the unforced disclosure to learners of their own particular talents and limitations as they encounter mathematics, music, woodwork, languages, and so on; the quickening of interest provoked by finding oneself in new imaginative neighbourhoods in these and other subjects; the new reserves of energy springing from even modest learning achievements and their affirmation; the acknowledgement by fellow students and by a teacher of one's specific contribution to a topic being explored; the attentive restraint that enables one to listen to and think about the standpoints of fellow learners (Hogan, 2010, ch. 4). Attention to benefits like these occurs all too rarely in the discourse of national educational policy, or in debates about policy-making. Is the pursuit of such benefits a political matter? Sometimes very much so, but not in Woodhead's sense of the political. Unlike the argu-

ments of White and Smith, there is no recognition in Woodhead's argument that education as a practice may have its own inherent goods.

Every practice worthy of the name has an internal politics as well as an external politics. The internal politics involve debates among the practitioners concerning things like the following: the best ways of allocating available resources in pursuit of the inherent purposes of the practice; the best ways of developing and refining these purposes so as to enhance the work of practitioners; the best ways of promoting these purposes in the wider society through the conduct of the practice itself. The internal politics of a practice are properly informed by the discoveries and insights furnished by a more specialised group within the practitioners, namely its researchers. Part of what constitutes the integrity of a practice (i.e. its integral-ness as distinct from merely its honesty) is the vibrancy of debate among its practitioners; for instance, debate over how the inherent purposes of the practice are to be disclosed and advanced, and how new benefits of the practice are to be best made available. Incisive research is crucial to informing such debate and to furnishing practice with promising ideas. When it comes to incorporating such ideas into concrete developments that advance the practice, the internal politics of the practice can be marked as much by acrimony as by harmony among the practitioners themselves.

The internal politics are largely distinct, though not completely so, from the external politics of a practice. In saying this, let me emphasise again that no practice can be carried on in isolation from the broader society in which it is situated. To say that education is a practice in its own right is not to make any claim to absolute autonomy for the practice. It is however to acknowledge that there are some core concerns—in education as in other practices—that are *not* the proper business of non-practitioners, including parliament. The external politics of a practice are concerned with issues in the relations between practitioners and their representatives on the one hand, and the powers-that-be in society on the other. In former eras, such reigning powers tended to be ecclesiastical where education was concerned. Nowadays they are predominantly secular, even party-political. Characteristically prominent in the external politics are the kinds of goals that the current reigning powers seek to push to the fore in a particular practice.

Practices like medicine, law, nursing, as well as education, are invariably attended by an external politics. Sometimes this politics can be fairly benign. In fact—as will be illustrated in the next section—it can be positively beneficial, especially where policy-making is properly democratic, as distinct from bureaucratic or party-sectarian; where it is philosophically coherent; where it is informed by relevant insights from research and by creative initiatives among practitioners themselves. But where such a politics becomes inattentive to the inherent benefits of a practice, trouble usually follows. Where it becomes aggressive or doctrinaire on the part of the powers-that-be, this invariably leads to attempts to colonise the practice and to harness it to purposes that are more party-political than educational. Demands are then routinely made on practitioners that are foreign to the purposes of their practice.

That such demands have become a regular feature of educational policy in the UK, and especially England, is evident from many of the contributions to the Special Issue on Policy. Examples include: Winstanley's account of the 'cherry picking' of reforms from elsewhere for enforcement in England; Hodgson's analysis of the subordination of research to 'innovation' in educational policy; Davis' critique of the imposition of a 'regimen of synthetic phonics'; Oancea's and Orchard's portrayal of the extent of government involvement in shaping teacher education in England, in contrast to the significant roles played by Teaching Councils in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales; and not least the three critical appraisals of prominent aspects of neo-liberalism in UK higher education by Ward, Staddon and Standish, and Smith.

The dominant tenor of educational policy reforms in other Western countries has mirrored the post-1988 developments in the UK. In fact that tenor has been decisively influenced by the policy turns taken by Britain under Thatcher and by parallel developments in the US under Reagan. It has been more pronounced in some countries than others (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009, Ch. 3). It has been described as an international virus by Pasi Sahlberg (2011) from Finland, who calls it the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). Prominent attention is given to 'evidence-based' education policy in the later articulations of that international reform movement. Despite this, as Sahlberg points out, the movement itself is particularly resistant to evidence from countries that haven't followed the dominant international pattern. These include not only Finland, but also, to a greater or lesser degree, countries like Ireland and Scotland; also some state and province jurisdictions in USA, Canada and Australia. Much of this contrasting evidence not only raises questions about specific policy measures of the international reform movement. It also counters many of the movement's underlying assumptions. Sahlberg, whose evidence is drawn from analysing three decades of educational policy reforms in his own country, and from OECD reports, is not an educational philosopher. Yet his analysis is replete with philosophically significant insights and provides some fresh orientations for a kind of thinking that might fruitfully inform educational policy.

A CONTRASTING PATTERN IN EDUCATIONAL THINKING AND POLICY-MAKING

There are two main reasons why Sahlberg's work is important to the concerns of this article. Firstly, it furnishes an illuminating example of how things stand when a practice is largely 'in good order', to use MacIntyre's phrase. Secondly it also illustrates tellingly the extent to which a practice such as formal education can enjoy the trust of those other than the practitioners: politicians, parents, students and the public more widely. Sahlberg's key work is titled *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* (2011). Finland has been so frequently to the fore in comparative evaluations of educational performances

that it has attracted the curiosity of policy-makers in many countries. Mindful of this, Sahlberg takes care in the early pages of *Finnish Lessons* to disabuse any reader who might seek in the book a collection of tips and quick-fix solutions. In fact he offers recurring warnings to the 'educational pilgrims' who have been coming in droves to Finland in search of such solutions (Sahlberg, 2011, 2012).

Central among the Finnish 'lessons' is that productive policy development in education arises in the first place from a clear demarcation of aims. Such demarcation involves a commitment to aims that are primarily or inherently educational, distinguishing these from aims where ideological or party-political purposes are to the fore. Probing this lesson further, productive policy development also involves a long-term commitment to such educational aims by successive governments, notwithstanding the different political complexions of these governments (Sahlberg, 2011, pp. 130–131). This two-fold insight is a recurrent theme throughout Sahlberg's analysis. In that analysis he identifies five main areas where evolutionary policy reforms have brought about widely-supported changes in educational practice. The analysis also shows not only how the changes contrast with the prevalent international pattern, but also how they have built a strong tradition of respect in the relations between research, policy and practice.

The first of Sahlberg's five contrasts is between the dominant international tendency to prescribe standardised curricula and assessment measures and the Finnish policy of setting 'a clear but flexible national framework for school-based curriculum planning'. That flexible framework encourages local and individual pedagogical initiatives to promote a high quality learning experience for all students, not least those with special needs (pp. 101, 103).

The second contrast is that between a preoccupation with functional conceptions of literacy and numeracy in the international approach, and a focus on creative learning strategies in Finland. To an emphasis on measurable skills in reading, writing, mathematics and the natural sciences is opposed an 'equal value to all aspects of the growth of an individual's personality, moral character, creativity, knowledge and skills' (pp. 100, 103).

The third contrast, broadly similar to the first, is between close specification of learning outcomes on the one hand and the encouragement of risk-taking and leadership initiatives in teaching on the other. The fourth is between 'borrowing market-oriented reform ideas' in dominant internal approaches and the Finnish practice of a critical engagement with one's own educational traditions and those of others; traditions that encourage a sense of ownership of innovations (pp. 100, 103).

The final contrast is between 'test-based accountability and control' and 'shared responsibility and trust'. The former involves a system of rewards, promotions and penalties controlled by the granting and withholding of funds which is quite foreign to the latter. Sahlberg continually points out that Finland has turned its back on market-led ideas where educational policy is concerned. Instead it has concentrated on 'gradually building a culture of responsibility and trust within the education system that values

teacher and principal professionalism in judging what is best for students' (pp. 101, 103).

Among the other developments that have contributed to the changed face of public education in Finland, two are particularly significant from an educational policy perspective. The first is the *peruskoulu*, initiative first introduced in the late 1970s and sustained thereafter despite sometimes strong opposition from some business and political leaders. The *peruskoulu* is a comprehensive school which endeavours to provide equal educational opportunities for all students over a nine-year period beginning at six years of age. In addition to being a non-selective school for each locality, the *peruskoulu* provides continuity in the educational experiences of students from six years of age to mid-adolescence (pp. 116–121). The *peruskoulu* also contributes to another major feature of Finnish education, namely a greater equity in achievements. Differences in achievements occur much more *within* schools than between schools, thus making choice of school a relatively unimportant issue in Finnish society (pp. 45 ff.).

The second development is a system of teacher education: (a) that is highly selective; (b) that is largely experiential in character; (c) that is progressively research-based from enrolment to graduation; (d) that most often leads to a master's degree after five years of study (ch. 3). Sahlberg gives a particular importance to these two developments, as he does to the resolve of successive Finnish governments to remain with the distinct tenor of educational reforms that took shape in Finland in the 1980s.

PHILOSOPHY, POLICY AND PRACTICE: SOME FRESH REFLECTIONS

An intriguing point about the policy developments of recent decades in Finland is that they seem to owe little to insights and arguments arising from philosophy of education. In the light of the contrasts outlined in the previous section one might expect to find the discipline of philosophy of education thriving in Finland. While one may find much on 'Finland's philosophy of education' through web searches, philosophy of education itself, as a field of study and research, seems to be virtually absent from Finnish higher education. This loss for the discipline does not, however, betoken an absence of incisive reflection and discourse on educational policy issues among Finnish scholars and researchers in education. Such discourse has been alive and well for many decades, but its institutional home is to be found mainly in centres for research on lifelong learning, pedagogy and educational policy studies in the universities, including the Finnish Institute for Educational Research at the University of Jyväskylä (FIER <http://ktl.jyu.fi/ktl/english/introduction>).

From a philosophical standpoint however it is significant that this discourse is concerned not merely with the relationship between research and policy, but with the three-way relationship between research, policy *and* practice. Practice, including its aims as well as its conduct, seems to be the

key point of reference for educational thought, research and policy. There is a further key suggestion to be considered here from the Finnish experience. This suggestion is that illuminating and critiquing this three-way relationship between practice, policy and research might define a central purpose of philosophy of education itself, enhancing its conceptual reach and making it more fruitful for both policymakers and educational practitioners. In fact this might constitute the heart of the work to be done to recover what John White calls the discipline's lost *métier*. While such work would be all to the good, I don't go all the way with White in regarding that *métier* as lost. Some might argue in fact that the discipline has flourished in new directions in recent decades (e.g. Griffiths, 2012; Ruitenberg, 2010); or that a concern with educational policy should constitute just one of a number of focal themes within the philosophy of education.

My own argument is that the philosophy of any practice is first and foremost concerned with the illumination, the justification and the enhancement of a coherent enterprise, or distinct domain of purposeful human experience. For the philosophy of education this is possible only if education is in some meaningful degree acknowledged as a practice in its own right, with its own coherence. Parallels that initially come to mind are the philosophy of law and the philosophy of science. Though such parallels cannot be explored in detail here, reference to them identifies one important reason why I have given prominence to the notion of education as a *practice* in its own right. A related reason is that maintaining a focus on practice and practitioners keeps to the fore the important distinction between the inherent and extrinsic benefits of a practice. It also emphasises the equally important distinction between the internal and the external politics of a practice.

But there is also a further, compelling reason. Many readers of this journal will recall that a decade ago, the philosopher who had done so much to elucidate the notion of practice, Alasdair MacIntyre, denied in a dialogue with Joseph Dunne that teaching was a practice. Not only that. The stance towards teaching that he took on that occasion also led him to conclude that 'any conception of the philosophy of education as a distinct area of philosophical enquiry is a mistake' (Dunne and MacIntyre, 2002, p. 9). On such an account, philosophy of education, far from losing its *métier*, had no *métier* to lose. MacIntyre's view would rule out from the start any parallels between philosophy of education and philosophy of science, or of law. In fact MacIntyre's arguments on education in *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), particularly on 'the excellences, the virtues, that distinguish teacher from apprentice or student' (p. 92), are in marked contrast to the view he expressed in the dialogue with Dunne. In that dialogue he claimed, curiously, that 'teaching is never more than a means' (Dunne and MacIntyre, 2002, p. 9). A special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Dunne and Hogan, 2003) provided some searching criticisms of MacIntyre's claims in the dialogue with Dunne (Noddings, 2003; Dunne, Hogan). It also provided further elucidations of Aristotelian understandings of practice in educational contexts (by D. Carr, 2003; Higgins, 2003; Vokey, 2003).

These remarks on the proper *métier* of the philosophy of education, prompted initially by reflections on policymaking in the UK and a contrasting pattern in Finland, bring us to a pressing question. Can the pursuit of the notion of education as a practice in its own right serve to qualify the philosophy of education as an acknowledged branch of philosophy? Or, must one acquiesce in the view that education is inescapably such a contested arena that the philosophy of education can be at best an intellectual resource for supporting one or other 'ism'? If the latter, the notion of philosophy of education as something having its own *métier* can scarcely be a coherent one. Philosophy of education is likely to have one predominant meaning in one country or region or intellectual milieu, and contrasting meanings in others (e.g. neo-liberal philosophy of education, nationalist philosophy of education, Catholic philosophy of education, postmodernist philosophy of education, and so on). Such disparate or agonistic engagements can scarcely advance the coherence of education itself as a discipline of thought and action.

In answering 'no' to the second alternative here (i.e. to philosophy of education as a resource for one or other 'ism'), I am not saying 'yes' to the first. I am not arguing that the philosophy of education should be an acknowledged 'branch' of philosophy. I regard it as continually worth the effort to seek to establish the coherence and value of philosophy of education as a *sui-generis* form of enquiry; but a form of enquiry with practical intent from the start. I believe we should be less concerned about whether or not philosophy of education is seen as a branch of a larger discipline called academic philosophy. Whatever it is to be called—philosophy of education in my view—the conceptual elucidation and practical pursuit of the three-fold relationship between educational practice, policy and research that I mentioned above is itself a *praxis*. It is a distinct kind of *practical* philosophy. It is inadequately understood if it is conceived as a sub-species of ethics, or epistemology, or political philosophy, or philosophy of mind; or as any amalgam of these. On my own argument it is a self-critical form of enquiry into the deliberate promotion, and the justification, of fruitful learning in human experience. It is a form of enquiry that properly orients the self-understanding and actions of educational practitioners, including leaders and researchers, within the social and historical circumstances in which they are placed. As such it owes as much to examples like those of Socrates in the earlier Platonic dialogues as to insights supplied by ethics or philosophy of mind, or to the theoretical requirements of today's academic philosophy.

I want to suggest that this form of enquiry-cum-action is one in which all beginning educational practitioners need at least a rudimentary level of capability. Thus understood, the philosophy of education might also be seen as yielding insights of increasing importance to practitioners as they advance in their careers to positions of leadership. It is difficult to see how the internal politics of educational practice can be productively and defensibly pursued without a proficiency among practitioners in this kind of discipline. The same is largely true of the external politics of the practice, whether or not its participants are themselves educational practitioners.

In conclusion, I believe there are really crucial lesson for the philosophy of education in studying the vexed history of educational reform in most Western countries in recent decades, as well the happier reform experience of countries like Finland. Our discipline should begin with adequately undertaken explorations of the notion of education as a human practice. This includes the coherence, the promise and the defensibility of the many forms of such practice. By taking this path philosophical reflection in education is likely to find more fertile ground for pursuing its manifold tasks.

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