CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON TEACHER EDUCATION
Why Future Teachers Need Educational Philosophy

Howard Woodhouse
“Woodhouse here provides a clear, cogent and compelling case for the practical importance of philosophy in teacher education. Arguing that teachers need to be more than technicians, he presents an incisive attack on the current market/managerial model of education. He suggests that current practice leads to conformity and lack of autonomy in teachers, and, drawing on the work of Bertrand Russell among others, he argues that philosophy is the means to developing instead their ‘freedom of mind’. Timely and convincing, this is a major contribution to discussion of teacher education.”

Robin Barrow, Emeritus Professor, Philosophy of Education, Simon Fraser University, Canada

“Howard Woodhouse has written an important and timely book to counter the dismal state of schooling in the English-speaking world. As he uncovers, contemporary schooling is beset with an impoverished understanding of education and ill-advised state and bureaucratic directives that undermine teachers and teacher education. Drawing upon philosophical insights from Bertrand Russell and other important thinkers, Professor Woodhouse points the way to how philosophy can enrich teaching, teacher education, and our schools.”

David P. Ericson, Professor Emeritus, University of Hawaii at Manoa

“Today we don’t just find ourselves in the midst of an information hurricane. In less than a generation, we have transitioned from the information age to the misinformation age, from a time in which education was important for finding jobs to a time in which education is important for our very survival. Written for the thoughtful professional, Critical Reflections on Teacher Education provides a forward-looking vision of what it means to be educated. It reminds us that we need to have a conversation about the distinction between education and indoctrination, about how to distinguish sense from nonsense, and about how to disagree without being disagreeable. Woodhouse is to be congratulated for beginning this conversation.”

Andrew Irvine, Professor, Department of Economics, Philosophy and Political Science, University of British Columbia

“In this book, Howard Woodhouse analyzes the impact of the present-day emphasis on efficiency in education, the tendency to aim education almost exclusively at future work, and the teaching of an official government line throughout the years of schooling. For Woodhouse, as for his predecessor
in such criticism, Bertrand Russell, this is an unjustified and even appalling development. Woodhouse addresses this development by encouraging philosophical discussion in teacher education programs and recommending that teachers should themselves be encouraged to engage in “philosophy for children” at every level in schooling. This is an important book that should be read in all teacher education programs and by anyone who cares about the education of our citizenry in general.”

Ian Winchester, Professor and Past Dean, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary
Critical Reflections on Teacher Education argues that educational philosophy can improve the quality of teacher education programmes in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The book documents the ways in which the market model of education propagated by governments and outside agencies hastens the decline of philosophy of education and turns teachers into technicians in hierarchical school systems. A grounding in educational philosophy, however, enables future teachers to make informed and qualified judgements defining their professional lives. In a clear and accessible style, Howard Woodhouse uses a combination of reasoned argument and narrative to show that educational philosophy, together with Indigenous knowledge systems, forms the basis of a climate change education capable of educating future teachers and their students about the central issue of our time.

Howard Woodhouse is Professor Emeritus and Co-Director of the Saskatchewan Process Philosophy Research Unit in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. He is the author of more than eighty book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals, and his Selling Out: Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market was shortlisted for a Saskatchewan Book Award.
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON TEACHER EDUCATION

Why Future Teachers Need Educational Philosophy

Howard Woodhouse
To my Parents, John and Joan
Sine qua non
The world now moves for the first time in history to a global struggle between knowledge and misrepresentation as the finally contending forces.

John McMurtry
# CONTENTS

*Preface*  

Introduction  

1 The Demise of Educational Philosophy and the Rise of the Market Model  

2 Bertrand Russell’s Humanistic Educational Philosophy and the Renewal of Teacher Education  

3 Philosophy for Children, Teacher Education, and the Challenge of the Market Model  

4 Life-Value, Climate Crisis, and Teacher Education  

5 A Philosophical Framework for Climate Change Teacher Education  

*Index*
When you picked up this book, you may have wondered why teacher education requires a treatise on educational philosophy. Although you are right to be sceptical, I hope you will continue reading and find that the idea of future teachers studying what was once a foundational discipline has considerable value. Rather than a luxury to be dispensed with in difficult times, philosophy of education raises questions without which teaching becomes a dull affair, a mechanical routine that deadens the spirit of its practitioners. If for no other reason, it earns the right to regain its position at the core of teacher education.

You may also wonder if this claim to its centrality means that educational philosophy can resolve the problems facing teachers in their classroom practice. This would be to overestimate the scope of the book. Rather, I argue that the questions raised by this discipline are valuable because they enlarge the vision of those who entertain them. Bertrand Russell once argued that philosophy can strengthen the imagination and enable one to contemplate the universe and humanity’s place in it dispassionately, opening the mind to new possibilities. These, I believe, are the very characteristics needed by teachers in a society that seems increasingly polarized and fragmented.

If you remain unconvinced, consider that during the COVID–19 pandemic, the general public has really appreciated the ways in which teachers have adjusted their classroom practice, caring for the learning needs of students by using technology in creative ways. They have used their capacity to make informed and qualified judgements about how best to meet the goal of education, disseminating knowledge while showing compassion for the emotional problems experienced by children. At the same time, teachers have had to cope with the stress they themselves experience. Those parents who have tried to educate their own children at home know only too well the difficulties involved.
Would educational philosophy help teachers deal with unexpected daily problems such as this and avoid the burnout that affects so many in the profession? I argue that it would, and I hope your curiosity will lead you to find out why.

There are many people who have helped me along the journey leading to the book’s publication. Among these are the thousands of future teachers as well as the many teachers in graduate classes at various universities whose insights have been invaluable. Ian Winchester, my Ph.D. supervisor and friend for fifty years has given me wise advice during all that time. The late John McMurtry always encouraged me in my intellectual endeavours, reading part of the manuscript before he passed into another realm of being. Colleagues in the Saskatchewan Process Philosophy Research Unit – Bob Regnier, Adam Scarfe, Ed Thompson, and the late Mark Flynn – have been collaborators on many projects. Matthew Friberg, my editor at Routledge in New York, has provided enthusiastic support throughout, and Jessica Cooke at Routledge in Oxford has also guided me along the way. Most of all, Viola, my lifelong partner has sustained my enthusiasm, acting as loving mentor when I needed encouragement to continue. Without her love and support, the book would not have seen the light of day.
INTRODUCTION

The demands now being made on schools, colleges and universities are for professional and vocational training and cannot be described as education. A society that measures everything in terms of work done and money earned is not concerned with anything beyond the requisite number of persons duly trained and labelled with the correct diplomas and degrees and ready for use and service.¹

Dora Russell

This book is about the importance of educational philosophy to teacher education programmes in several countries of the English-speaking world. Without a basic understanding of philosophical issues and their relationship to educational practice, I argue that future teachers are unlikely to cope with the challenges they face in the contemporary classroom. Rather, they will become lost in the demands of hierarchical school systems that emphasize conformity to rules and policies, which negate the necessary autonomy of qualified judgement defining their profession.

As external agencies exert greater control over the daily practices of teachers, the need for a critical and reasoned response to the anti-educational undertow in which they are immersed becomes a matter of urgency that is widely felt but suppressed. Suppression operates by a commonly held view of non-teaching administrative personnel that philosophy of education and other humanities subjects like history of education have no “real,” i.e. market, value in the preparation of teachers. As a result, there is a growing consensus that these foundational disciplines no longer have relevance to teacher education.

This narrow conception advanced by administrators in governments, universities, and school boards has become dominant in the official educational

DOI: 10.4324/9781003150701-1
discourse of our era. Indeed, it defines the way in which professors of education as well as teachers are increasingly made to understand their work as technicians in an assembly-line system that rewards compliance rather than relevantly qualified and informed judgement in the art and disciplines of education.  

The evidence from scholars in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom will be considered, showing that an ever-tightening grip upon teacher education programmes has been taking place for some time. In addition, my own experience in the field since the mid-1970s will be interwoven into the text to provide an ongoing narrative about the systematic selection against any educational philosophy as worthy of study. The synthesis of these two perspectives – reasoned argument as well as personal and professional experience – paints a vivid picture of how the discipline has declined in stature.

However, I oppose this trend and argue in favour of educational philosophy as a necessary condition for the emancipation of the minds of future teachers and students from the fetters of regimentation and apathy. Without this logical and emotional life space, the ability of teachers to reflect upon the complex world with which they are faced, and their capacity to implement pedagogical approaches that address the felt needs and longing of students for reliable meaning is undermined. Only by integrating theory and practice with established knowledge that promotes life can teaching enhance a vital and comprehensive understanding among both pedagogical partners.

I use a conceptual framework adopted primarily, though not exclusively, from the educational philosophy of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) to address current issues in teacher education. In his In Praise of Idleness, originally published in 1935, Russell is remarkably prescient in his critique of “the cult of efficiency” and its dangers for teachers and public education. The emphasis on instrumental knowledge excludes any notion of value other than money and power, for “the notion that the desirable activities are those that bring a profit has made everything topsy-turvy.” In order to avoid the monetization of human thought and action, Russell argues that educators should promote the “contemplative habit of mind,” an approach to knowledge in which students come to appreciate that “what is needed in our very complex modern society is calm consideration, with readiness to call dogmas in question and freedom of mind to do justice to the most diverse points of view.” By engaging in reflective thought, students learn to question the “intolerance and bigotry” pervasive in society as well as “the belief that vigorous action is admirable even when misguided.” By considering all claims to knowledge impartially, including those opposed to their own, students can critically evaluate them on the basis of competing bodies of evidence. Russell’s conception of the “freedom of mind” necessary to avoid dogmatic and fanatical belief systems is precisely what is required in teacher education today.

Unless future teachers learn to weigh the evidence supporting policies imposed on them from above and use reasoned evidence to determine whether they are sound, they are likely to become pawns in a game whose rules are determined
by external authority, for whom the implicitly deciding value is more money for oneself. A prime example is the logic of the pay scale and the promise of future income for students that now control “education.” In such ways, aspirations of teachers and students for their own autonomy of thought will be dashed, and the process of teaching and learning will become little more than indoctrination.  

In a later book chapter, titled “The Functions of a Teacher,” Russell continues his analysis of the threat to teachers’ authority posed by “educational authorities” who employ them:

In most countries certain opinions are recognized as correct, and others as dangerous. Teachers whose opinions are not correct are expected to keep silent about them. If they mention their opinions, it is propaganda, while the mentioning of correct opinions is considered to be merely sound instruction. The suppression of true beliefs, Russell argues, is “one of the besetting sins of those who draw up educational schemes,” because the young are exposed to falsehoods they come to accept without question. The erosion of teachers’ authority, which is based upon the knowledge of their disciplines, expunges the freedom to express views that are deemed controversial but not examined for their truth value, which once again reflects the logic of indoctrination. As a result, students are exposed to the propaganda of the state with the result that the role of publicly funded school systems in democratic societies to educate knowledgeable citizens is turned on its head.

In order to overcome this situation, Russell argues:

The teacher, like the artist, the philosopher, and the man [sic] of letters, can only perform his work adequately if he feels himself to be an individual directed by an inner impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority.

Like other intellectuals, teachers’ freedom stems from their inner creative impulses, not from any external authority imposed upon them by force, or loss of monetary gain. Unless their freedom of expression is protected from the incursion of outside influences, teachers will be exposed to “a deliberate restraint on the part of those in power.”

The structure of the book is as follows. Each chapter begins with a prologue in which I relate my own experience to the major themes under consideration, thereby underlining their importance. In Chapter 1, I analyse the current demise of educational philosophy in teacher education, showing how governments have exerted greater control over education in general, while at the same time steering it towards the market. The market model undermines the goal of education