

Review of

Philosophy of Education

Laura D'Olimpio, Jane Gatley, and Ruth Wareham, London: Palgrave, 2025

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Inspired by their teaching practice at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, D'Olimpio, Gatley, and Wareham's new book, *Philosophy of Education* (2025) offers a comprehensive overview of many core philosophical concepts associated with the study of education. They explore these ideas, as they are taken up in the tradition of analytic philosophers, and bring them into conversation with relevant and current educational challenges. Having found it challenging to source quality texts as introductory reads in their own course delivery, this "textbook" has been designed to be up-to-date and accessible for undergraduate students learning about this sub-discipline within education for the first time. Concomitantly, it offers more seasoned scholars or graduate students the opportunity to expand their own perspectives to the aims of education, knowledge and its relation to curriculum, virtue ethics, and other concepts of the like in the contemporary context of cascading global crises. This book will not only be of interest to a wide array of education scholars seeking an analytic viewpoint, but also to those in philosophy and beyond.

Historically, turbulence and dis-ease—whether it be social, cultural, political, environmental, or a combination of these—has been fertile soil for philosophers. For instance, during the Warring States period (ca. 475–221 B.C.E.) in Ancient China, marked by military warfare and political battles, thinkers such as Confucius, Lao Zi, Mencius, and Zhuang Zi contemplated on notions such as virtue, morality, and governance. During the Classical (ca. 510–323 B.C.E.) and Hellenistic periods (ca. 323–30 B.C.E.), philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics deeply considered ideas about rationality, flourishing, and cosmopolitanism amidst a time of intense imperial conquests, slavery, and various endemics, as well as periods of prosperity and stability with the rise of the Roman Empire. In such times, philosophers have turned their attention both inwardly and outwardly, cultivating a love of wisdom (*philosophia*). As contemporary mainstream educational fields continue to receive critiques in relation to an over-emphasis on measurement-based approaches in assessing learning quality, social discourses that fail to keep up with current societal challenges, unaddressed educational inequalities, and issues to do with the colonial legacy of formal education, to name a few (Biesta, 2018, 2021; Low, 2025; Shahjahan, 2025), what is the role and significance of philosophy? (Re)turning to fundamental questions and contemplating with the authors' presented arguments, explications, and examples from practice, reminds us "how important concepts in the philosophy of education lie at the heart of practical concerns which manifest themselves in policy, educational institutions, and in the educational goods that people have access to" (D'Olimpio et al., 2025, p. 1). The strength of D'Olimpio, Gatley, and Wareham's contribution can be observed in how they wrestle with ideas through dialogicity, as well as their invitation to contemplate concepts in earnest and with philosophical nuance.

The structure of the book is particularly illustrative of the interconnected relationship between educational theory and practice. Apart from the introduction, *Philosophy of Education* consists of six chapters, each exploring a key concept: teaching and indoctrination, knowledge, equality, intelligence, virtue, and rights respectively. Each chapter introduces an educational concept through the “philosophical methodology of conceptual clarification” (p. 2), as inspired by early British analytic philosophers of education, such as Paul Hirst (1974) and Richard S. Peters. The first concept that we are introduced to is “learning,” as it is intimately connected with educational aims, pedagogy, and reform. Beginning with a distinction between psychological and philosophical learning theories, we see how the role of philosophy offers contextual and relational lenses in understanding such a broad and encompassing concept. Some framings of learning included are: learning as coming to know, learning behaviours and habits, rote learning, and learning for mastery. Through multiple philosophical examinations of what learning signifies and represents, the authors define *learning* as “acquir[ing] or mak[ing] progress towards acquiring, an ability, disposition, or understanding by paying relevant attention” (p. 17). This is immediately followed with the provocation: “Consider whether you agree with this definition. Can you think of any counter arguments or potential problems?” (p. 17). One perhaps would skim over this and hastily continue reading. However, having recently been a course instructor for an undergraduate course entitled “Introductory to Philosophy of Education” at a Canadian post-secondary institution, I have come to acknowledge the pedagogical richness that can be cultivated from dwelling within such questions. Through reflection, dialogicity, and open-mindedness, the very context of these post-secondary students is being questioned, analyzed, and re-cast. Philosophy of education, importantly, in both theory and practice, is a place of *fragility* in which worldviews shift, identities evolve, and relationships grow or unravel. Each subsequent chapter follows a pattern of presenting various theories apropos the focus concept with rhetorical questions peppered throughout. Accordingly, *how* one chooses to engage with D’Olimpio, Gatley, and Wareham’s text, becomes key to their reception of ideas, and the book, overall.

Critiques on the limitations of conceptual analysis are also mentioned throughout the book. When done alone, conceptual analysis without corresponding existential or societal inquiry can often fail to offer significant educational value. In light of this, D’Olimpio, Gatley, and Wareham subsequently demonstrate how each concept is intimately linked to current debates in educational policy and practice. Their attempts to show this complexity and symbiotic relationship between theory and practice indicates progress in the field of philosophy of education, “breaking down big issues and thinking carefully about their constituent parts—the concepts, the ethical and political theories, and the bearing of these on real world issues” (p. 8). In the second chapter, for instance, following the introduction of teaching and indoctrination as interlinked concepts, we are led through an evaluation of rational autonomy as an aim of liberal education that contemplates on selected normative arguments. This proceeds in three parts. First, the authors explore autonomy in its varying accounts—circumstantial, dispositional, and rational (Hand, 2006). Then, they define rationality using Aristotelian thought, as well as Harvey Siegel’s (2017) discussion of the concept vis-à-vis critical thinking. Finally, we are directed to critiques of rationality as the ultimate educational aim, albeit very briefly. This includes Jane Roland Martin’s (1981) influential presidential address “The Ideal of the Educated Person,” as well as the contentions around legacies of Eurocentrism (Maldono-Torres et al., 2018). Through this process, we are guided through deliberation about what *ought* to be, bringing awareness and critical reflection to ideas in education that one may not have previously examined in depth. The applied example of faith-based education complements this conceptual clarification, with challenges such as state funding, social stigma, and policy implementation explored. Such conceptual analysis, paired with examples of political and organizational challenges, thus draws readers to think and rethink about questions apropos educational aims, epistemology, moral agency, and citizenship, which hold pedagogical, relational, and ethical implications for those entangled in these complex systems.

At the conclusion of each chapter, a range of recommended and further readings, paired with suggested research questions, are provided. For example, the fifth chapter on intelligence poses research

questions such as: “Is the concept of intelligence helpful or harmful in schools? Can you test for intelligence?” (p. 107). These prompts offer educators and students various scaffolded opportunities for potentially deepening one’s understanding of educational theory and reflections on their own educational journey. Henceforth, the structure that D’Olimpio, Gatley, and Wareham have set out for their text keeps teachers and students front of mind, without neglecting the importance of conceptual clarity and critical engagement in considering the whole of an educational system and the gaps that lie between theory, practice, and praxis.

An asset of this book is its capacity to connect core concepts with contemporary educational examples. Whilst many examples are from the United Kingdom, where the authors are located, we are continually reminded of just how embedded these notions are in our daily educational spheres. I wish to use the sixth chapter as exemplary. It conceptually clarifies “virtue” through introducing notions of moral agency, *phronesis*, Aristotelian virtue ethics, character, and intellectual virtues and vices. By exploring both intellectual virtues and vices, we are encouraged to consider issues such as epistemic injustice, dogmatism, and unconscious bias in the context of flourishing as an educational aim. Supported by three normative moral theories—namely, Kant’s deontology, Bentham’s utilitarianism, and Aristotle’s virtue ethics—flourishing as an aim of education is examined for its strengths and weaknesses. Following this, we see an evaluation of character education, as well as a curation of current educational approaches associated with virtue such as Philosophy for Children (P4C), Socratic dialogue, and the “Primary Ethics” program delivered across K-6 schools in New South Wales, Australia. Together, these viewpoints allow the reader to see a wider picture of what virtue is and how it is operationalized in global educational contexts. For those undertaking introductory philosophy of education courses—many of whom intend to become accredited teachers in early childcare or K-12 institutions—the benefits of seeing various concrete examples from the United Kingdom and beyond fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities entangled in educational practice, policies, and resources. This may hold them in good stead as they further their studies in education and undertake practicums in their local communities.

After engaging with D’Olimpio, Gatley, and Wareham’s timely work, I am left with some musings and questions that are auxiliary for those wishing to use this text as a resource or pedagogical springboard. Firstly, whilst this text serves well as a comprehensive introductory text to the philosophy of education—as understood in the *analytic tradition*—it innately reinforces its own myopia. As the final chapter attends to the concept of rights, through citizenship, autonomy, and the liberal state, I am left desiring a concluding chapter or an epilogue that invites further dialogue, acknowledging other perspectives within philosophy of education. I find this to be a shortcoming of their work as other conceptions of philosophy of education are also absent of significant mention in this text, comparative, intercultural, global, and decolonial to name a few. For many interested in or aligned with pragmatic and progressive education for instance, the ideas of philosophers and pedagogues such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Nel Noddings will require further research and reading by scholars and the philosophically curious.

Secondly, whilst conceptual clarity has its practicalities and is commonly seen in analytic traditions, in my reading, I kept wondering about the slipperiness of language and the fluidity in meaning—the nature of impermanence. This stems from the multitude of interpretative possibilities often considered by scholars in edusemiotics, who deeply consider the mediating relationship between organism and environment (Campbell, 2018a, 2018b; Stables, 2012). This dovetails with my first critique about the acknowledgement of other ways in which we understand, promote, and even speculate about the field. Consider edusemiotics for instance, as influenced by thinkers such as Charles Sanders Pierce and Andrew Stables, which conceptualizes learning *as* semiosis, recognizing the “continual emergence” of meaning and “goes beyond what is reducible and describable through philosophical or mathematical reductions” (Campbell, 2018b, p. 291). In this view, meaning is embedded and generated through the ongoing relations between signs, those who interpret them, and the historically situated environment, contrasting the analytic perspective taken by D’Olimpio and colleagues. However, if the authors’ primary audience is undergraduate students, then what responsibilities do we have as philosophers of education in recognizing that which lies beyond in non-linguistic understandings of the concepts explored, not to

mention the ephemerality of pedagogical moments, in all its complexity, which may never neatly fit into technical philosophizing? Gestures towards such nuances and inquiries, I think, would be appreciated, by students and scholar-practitioners.

My final reservations lie at the heart of teaching and the implications this book may have upon application. Whilst there are some suggested readings and online resources given with the applied examples in each chapter, I am cognizant of university students in culturally diverse classrooms who may be engaged with this text. How might it connect with, challenge, reestablish, or expand their perspectives? What are the pedagogical implications or possibilities for these classrooms? An educator designing and delivering a course on philosophy of education would find themselves needing additional resources to create a comprehensive, cohesive, or contextually sensitive curriculum.¹ The illustrative examples offered in each chapter are predominately about education in England or the United Kingdom, reflecting “a historically inward-looking focus, which is common among many philosophers of education, who are interested in thinking about and improving society and education on their own turf primarily” (Jackson & Kwak, 2025, p. 3). With recent considerations for a more global view, Jackson and Kwak (2025) declare the need for a more “substantive picture of valuable traditions of philosophical questioning related to education that showcases the development, growth, movement, and flourishing of key ideas through ongoing conversation over centuries in different parts of the world” (p. 4). Given Jackson and Kwak’s (2025) invitation, this book, which emphasizes an onto-epistemology informed by the analytic tradition, could then be part of a poly-vocal pedagogical approach in our “porous, increasingly borderless, pluralistic intellectual world” (p. 4). By bringing key concepts in education and exploring them with other onto-epistemologies, in ways that are non-dominating or integrative, we create interstices that are then pedagogically rich to gain a more encompassing understanding of ourselves and philosophy’s contribution to education—the good, the bad, and the ugly. This requires one to practice epistemic humility, non-judgement, and even playfulness apropos constructing novel perspectives. To that end, *Philosophy of Education* may serve as *one* of many text selections curated for the post-secondary educational context to generate dialogicity, historical consciousness, philosophical depth, and cultural responsiveness. More broadly, it may function as a cornerstone for productive conversations around how we understand and enact education in sustainable, just, and responsive ways.

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¹ See Zrudlo (2025) for an extended treatment on the role of philosophy in teacher education programs with a historical survey of its marginalization, critique, and examination of approaches moving forward using R. S. Peters as a springboard. Tasked with designing and teaching a philosophical foundations course for the Bachelor of Education degree at Université du Québec à Montréal, Zrudlo (2025) offers detailed considerations of the challenges and pedagogic approaches associated with his own practice in a Canadian context. Such explorations may serve as instructive to other educators in course design and delivery.

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