

Review of

## *Handbook of Philosophy of Education*

Edited by Randall Curren, New York, NY: Routledge, 2023

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It is practically impossible to pull together a genuinely comprehensive handbook for a sprawling field such as philosophy of education, especially in under 500 pages. That Randall Curren's new edited volume succeeds even partially in this respect is commendable. Non-Americans may find some of the chapters a tad provincial, but one certainly gets a good introduction to much of the recent literature, especially in North America. As Lee and Torres (2023) point out in their review of the *Handbook*, many of the contributing authors have recently published books in the field or have summarized the last decade or so of their work in a concise chapter. The *Handbook* therefore offers a good introduction to newcomers as well as a useful compilation of the positions of some of the key contributors to the debates of the past 10 to 15 years.

### Comparing Handbooks

At the outset of the volume, Curren explains that he was asked to edit the *Handbook* in order "to fill the void created by the advanced age of my 2003 Blackwell *Companion to the Philosophy of Education* and Harvey Siegel's 2009 *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*" (ix). There are in fact two other similar volumes, conspicuously absent from Curren's list, that have appeared since: the *Sage Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (2010), and the *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (2018), published by Springer in two volumes. Comparing these different volumes is instructive. A first table below captures general information related to size, as well as the names of the editors.

Volume	Year	Chapters	Pages	Editor(s)
Routledge <i>Handbook</i>	2023	35	448	Randall Curren
Springer <i>Handbook</i>	2018	94	1472	Paul Smeyers
<i>Sage Handbook</i>	2010	34	570	Richard Bailey, Robin Barrow, & David Carr
<i>Oxford Handbook</i>	2009	28	548	Harvey Siegel
Blackwell <i>Companion</i>	2003	45	638	Randall Curren

Table 1

Curren's new Routledge volume is thus the shortest handbook to appear in the past 20 years, by about 100 pages, though it boasts more chapters than Siegel's 2009 volume and a similar number as the 2010 *Sage Handbook*. It is also interesting to compare the ways in which the editors apportioned their respective volumes. A second table below lists the titles of the parts in each volume.

Curren's introductory chapter provides an excellent overview of the contents of each part of his volume, so I will not take up space by summarizing all that information here. Rather, I will focus on how its contents compare to the other volumes mentioned above, and some of its strengths and weaknesses. Like Siegel's volume, a whole part is dedicated to virtue and character, though Curren's handbook links this theme more firmly with the intellectual virtues. Notably absent from the current volume is a set of chapters on historical figures in the philosophy of education, though of course various contributing authors refer to some of these figures in the course of their arguments. The Sage and Springer handbooks, by contrast, dedicate more space to these kinds of chapters (note, of course, that the Springer handbook is vastly larger, given its two volumes, and thus had much more space to work with). I gather that Curren decided against this approach, in favour of covering more contemporary authors and topics; this seems to have been a sound choice, especially given the existence of the two-volume Springer *Handbook*.

Volume (editor)	Parts
Routledge <i>Handbook</i> (Curren)	Part 1: Fundamental Questions Part 2: Virtues of Mind and Character Part 3: Education and Justice Part 4: Educational Practices
Springer <i>Handbook</i> (Smeyers)	Part 1: Voices from the Present and the Past Part 2: Schools of Thought Part 3: Revisiting Enduring Debates Part 4: New Areas and Developments Part 5: Discussion
<i>Sage Handbook</i> (Bailey, Barrow, & Carr)	Part 1: Educational Philosophy and Theory Part 2: Some Key Historical Figures in the Philosophy of Education Part 3: Philosophy of Education and Educational Practice
<i>Oxford Handbook</i> (Siegel)	Part 1: Aims of Education Part 2: Thinking, Reasoning, Teaching, and Learning Part 3: Moral, Value, and Character Education Part 4: Knowledge, Curriculum, and Educational Research Part 5: Social and Political Issues Part 6: Approaches to Philosophy of Education and Philosophy
Blackwell <i>Companion</i> (Curren)	(not divided into parts)

Table 2

### Strengths of and Highlights from the New Handbook

In their review, Lee and Torres (2023) point out that Christopher Martin's, Jennifer Morton's, Lauren Bialystok's, and Doris Santoro's chapters are all respectively based on recent books by these scholars. One could add to this list Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift's chapter, Nancy Sherman's, Bryan R. Warnick's, and several others. The themes of the books on which these chapters are based are diverse, including the ethics of higher education (Martin, 2021; Morton, 2019), sex education (Bialystok & Andersen, 2022), the demoralization of teachers (Santoro, 2018), educational policymaking (Brighouse et al., 2018), Stoicism (Sherman, 2021), and punishment in schools (Scribner & Warnick, 2021). Again, that so much recent work in philosophy of education is introduced and summarized here makes Curren's volume a valuable resource. Another interesting feature of the Routledge *Handbook*, this one pointed out in A. C. Nikolaidis' review (2023), is the interdisciplinary character of many of the contributions. While

the chapters are primarily philosophical in nature, many of them draw heavily on work in psychology, sociology, policy studies, and other related fields. I imagine this is partially a reflection of Curren's own interests, which has drawn him deeply into collaborative work with psychologists, historians, and others.

I will not attempt a chapter-by-chapter review; rather, I will highlight three chapters that stood out on my reading. Catherine Elgin's chapter, on "Understanding" as an educational objective, is of great value. Advancing the understanding of students should, she argues, be a central aim of education. She contrasts understanding with the assimilation of information. Understanding is holistic: "It concerns systematic links across a range of phenomena, not a discrete, isolated matter of fact" (p. 69). Understanding is closely related to the "epistemic norms, standards, and criteria that govern" (p. 73) the disciplines and is demonstrated in a proper use of the terminology in use in these disciplines. Furthermore, "Understanding comes in degrees" (p. 73). Elgin's elaborations of the concept of understanding (which need to be complemented, I think, by some other sources, such as writers in the *Bildung* tradition) are especially helpful for teachers, who, after all, are directly responsible for nurturing understanding in students.

Another chapter that stood out to me was "How Should Evidence Inform Education Policy?," by Kathryn Joyce and Nancy Cartwright. The authors attempt to dampen the overzealous enthusiasm about the evidence-based education (EBE) movement, showing that this approach cannot be value-free, as it sometimes claims or appears to be. They focus on randomized control trials specifically, admitting their usefulness but showing how much context matters for interpreting their results, especially in identifying the factors that have contributed to a given outcome. The comments on implementation fidelity – the extent to which a given intervention is implemented in keeping with its design – are also helpful, moderating excessive enthusiasm about "what works." All educational researchers and policymakers should be familiar with these ideas.

Finally, Paul Watts and Kristján Kristjánsson have contributed a chapter offering an excellent overview of the field of character education. It outlines some of the different approaches (US-style character education of the 1980s and 1990s, Confucian character education, positive education, and Aristotelian character education), covers some of the controversies attending character education, and summarizes relevant research about how to teach for character education, as well as how to evaluate it. This chapter is one of those in the volume that draws in a lot of research from the discipline of psychology.

## Critical Comments

In his review of Curren's *Handbook*, Nikolaidis (2023) mentions that the contributing scholars are "from across North America, Europe, and the Middle East" (p. 350). As far as I can tell, the Middle East here is entirely represented by Israelis, and the few European contributors mostly issue from the UK, with a handful of exceptions (one from Germany and a couple from France). This distribution is of course *somewhat* natural, given the preponderance of the United States in the field. But, as I alluded to further above, many of the contributions also have a strong American flavour – such as a chapter centred on the debate about charter schools or another on free speech in education – giving the volume overall a certain tone and focus, whether intended or not. I felt this even as a Canadian, so I imagine others more distant from North America and its concerns will feel this even more strongly.

Besides the regional slant, the philosophical style of the contributions is somewhat uniform, as noted by Nikolaidis (2023), who detects an "exclusive focus on analytic philosophy" (p. 352). He would have liked to see more beyond the Anglo-American sphere, such as "continental or non-western philosophy of education" (p. 352). I would echo this thought, though again, it is difficult for a volume such as this to represent the entire range of work being undertaken today in the field, especially in so few pages. As for Lee and Torres (2023), they highlight neglected themes in the Routledge *Handbook*, such as early childhood education, adult education, and informal education. They note, however, that these gaps

are not necessarily a fault of the *Handbook* but are rather indicative of the lack of attention these themes have received in the field of philosophy of education itself.

There are other themes, though, that have a wealth of associated literature in the philosophy of education but are not represented in the *Handbook*. For example, there is no mention of the German *Bildung* tradition (*Bildung* does not show up in the index; neither do Herder, Humboldt, or even Hegel), despite this being a theme to which many philosophers of education have given attention, both in the past and more recently (see, e.g., Aagaard, 2021; Biesta, 2002; Jessop, 2012; Nicholson, 2022; Misawa, 2017; Stolz, 2020). Of course, this theme is far less popular in North America compared to the European continent. But even the most American philosopher of education of all time, John Dewey, gets scant representation in the volume. A couple of chapters mention him briefly; the most substantive discussion engages his democratic theory for a handful of pages. Again, this may be due to the decision to focus on contemporary issues, rather than historical figures, or yet another manifestation of how challenging it is to cover such a sprawling field as philosophy of education.

To conclude, I do not think the Routledge *Handbook* is as “comprehensive” (p. i) as it claims at the outset, but perhaps this is simply something one has to say, and, in any case, I cannot imagine what a truly comprehensive volume would look like, given the nature of the field. As it stands, it offers a very good introduction to substantive work published in the field over the past 10 years or so, especially in the North American context, and, for those who are keen on it, a healthy dose of interdisciplinary work that goes beyond philosophy.

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