

PHILOSOPHY AS POLICY, POLICY AS PHILOSOPHY: REVIVING A RADICAL RELATIONSHIP

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*How many philosophers does it take to change a light bulb?
“It depends what you mean by ‘change’...”*

The absence of philosophy in education policy rests in popular discourses that misconceive of it as an ‘armchair’ activity, remotely connected to everyday life, and not focused on concrete action. As this article’s opening suggests, philosophy bears the brunt of many a joke for allegedly spending too much time in contemplation of the obscure, without getting around to accomplishing the practical.

Policy, by contrast, is viewed as productive, and focused on solving problems (though not always to the satisfaction of all citizens). It is construed as linear and dealing exclusively with factual and technical matters. According to these stereotypical views (as common in the academy as they are among the public), philosophy *never* gets things done; policy *always* gets things done. As such, philosophy and policy appear to be incompatible. This essay explores how a reconstitution of these terms in a more accurate manner might revive their relationship. We will demonstrate how ‘common sense,’ anemic beliefs about philosophy and policy hinder the ability to view them in more productive ways.

Although philosophy may have garnered the impression that it is not concerned with practical matters, its very roots in the western tradition reflect a central concern with the practice of dialogue and discussion as a way to bring about productive change. The root of the English word ‘policy’ is the Greek word ‘polis,’ meaning the city in which philosophical and political discussions took place among full-fledged citizens responsible for determining how the state would be run. By abandoning its semantic roots, policy limits itself to narrow disciplinary methodologies, rather than broad philosophical inquiry.¹

In addition to being historically intricately related, philosophy and policy are at times synonymous. These similarities are a basis for reconfiguring philosophy’s place in policy. Indeed, philosophy is policy if we rely on philosophical texts to make suggestions about *what* the good life is and *how* to live the good life, reconcile tensions, and resolve dilemmas and come to compromise over disputes. Our concern here is education policy: the directions from governments as to the content and nature of

¹ Carl Mitcham and Richard Frodeman, “New Dimensions in the Philosophy of Science: Toward a Philosophy of Science Policy,” *Philosophy Today* 48 No. 5 (2004): 3-14.

education systems. Philosophy and education share a common goal: the development of individual and collective capacities, keeping in mind the nature of the good and virtuous life. Education policy offers both general and specific direction to achieve this goal.

Education policy (unlike philosophy) frequently makes the news. Unending cycles of reform lead to disputes over the relevance and quality of education. Ensuing headlines mourn the decline of education systems, while parents have taken to boycotting shortsighted standardized testing regimes.² At the centre of controversies about what should be taught, who should measure educational success and by what means, and how schools should be run is education policy.³ In the past 20 years, nations have taken to issuing more and more education policy, and that policy is increasingly detailed and prescriptive.⁴ Since the election of Ontario's Liberal government in 2003, the Ministry of Education has released unprecedented compulsory education policies on issues never before addressed: character education, financial literacy, mental health, daily physical activity, environmental action, to name but a few. Beyond its sheer quantity,⁵ such education policy is arguably distorted and incomplete, rife with slogans and rhetoric. We have all heard about 'evidence based teaching and policy,' 'back to basics' curriculum and 'character education,' without clarity about what justifies 'evidence,' 'basics' and 'character.'⁶

A preoccupation with standardization, test scores, quantitative indicators and narrow (often punitive) accountability measures de-humanizes learners. The high degree regulation makes students "objects" of education policy (education is "done to" objects), rather than subjects in several ways. First, highly prescriptive curriculum leaves little room for local curriculum development and attention to the needs of diverse communities. When this type of curriculum is "done to" them, little room is left for the kind of individually and culturally responsive content and pedagogy relevant to students and can take on issues of colonialism, racism, and power.⁷

² See, for example, Dennis Fox, "Radical Dilemmas in the Anti-High-Stakes-Testing Movement," *The Radical Teacher* No. 61 (2001): 28-35

³ Laura E. Pinto and John P. Portelli, "The Dangers of Liberal/Rationalist Policy Discourse and the Role of the Philosopher in Disrupting it, in *My Teaching, My Philosophy. Kenneth Wain: A Lifelong Engagement With Education* eds. S. Galea, D.P. Mercieca and J. Baldacchino (Eds.). (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).

⁴ Including Ontario's infamous *Common Sense Revolution* education reforms, see Laura E. Pinto, *Curriculum Reform in Ontario: 'Common Sense' Processes and Democratic Possibilities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012)

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For example, see Sue Winton, "The Appeal(s) of Character Education in Threatening Times: Caring and critical democratic responses," *Comparative Education* 44 No. 3 (2008): 305-316.

⁷ For specific examples, see Laura E. Pinto, "Race and Fear of the 'Other' in *Common Sense Revolution Reforms*," *Critical Education*, 4 No. 2 (2013): 1-26.

A second vehicle of dehumanization is the preoccupation with standardized testing, which reduces education to an exercise of ranking and sorting such that learning is equated to a single test event. Tests, with other accountability measures, create under-nourished student-teacher relationships when educator responsibilities shift to governments and not students.⁸ Standardized testing externalizes decisions about “what counts” as worthwhile knowledge, while other important issues not captured by standardized scores are “deemed irrelevant or scientifically irrational”⁹ – thus objectifying and de-humanizing both learner and teacher.

Ill-conceived safe schools policies founded on ‘zero-tolerance’ rhetoric are a third example of dehumanization. Under such policies, students are removed from school settings, with no consideration given to the individual or the circumstances. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) successfully challenged the province’s zero-tolerance policy for discrimination, resulting in massive policy change.¹⁰

The policies just described (and they only represent few among many more) failed to fully consider the implications of ill-conceived rhetoric behind them. Unfortunately, rhetoric has failed to produce meaningful public dialogue that might have informed better policy decisions, with the exception of OHRC’s challenge.

These examples call attention to a pronounced need for philosophical intervention in education policy. Yet, philosophy has been notably absent from the general study of policy. Carl Mitcham and Richard Frodeman report less than 20 publications in their search for “philosophy of policy,” and those that exist are “issues focused” rather than philosophical.¹¹

⁸ Pasi Sahlberg, “Rethinking Accountability in a Knowledge Society,” *Journal of Educational Change* 11 (2010): 45-61 and Laura E. Pinto, “The Erosion of Trust in Education: Teacher accountability and professionalism,” In *Reasonable responses: Essays in honour of Trudy Govier*, ed. Catherine Hundleby (Windsor, ON: Windsor Studies in Argumentation, in press)

⁹ Antonia Darder, “Schooling and the Culture of Dominion: The Politics of Standardized Testing,” in *The Pedagogies of Globalization*, ed. Gustavo Fischman & Peter McLaren (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 208 and also Gert J.J. Biesta, “Why ‘What Works’ Won’t Work: Evidence-based Practice and the Democratic Deficit In Educational Research,” *Educational Theory* 57 No. 1 (2007), 1-22.

¹⁰ Yvette Daniel and Karla Bondy, “Safe Schools and Zero Tolerance: Policy, Program and Practice in Ontario,” *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 70 (2008): 1-20.

¹¹ Carl Mitcham and Richard Frodeman, “New Dimensions in the Philosophy of Science: Toward a Philosophy of Science Policy,” *Philosophy Today* 48 No. 5 (2004): 3-14.

Yet, education policy *is* philosophy in that it defines educational purpose, the range of options to achieve that purpose, and argues for the application of a particular path to normative outcomes. By reconceiving policy as philosophy and vice versa, we reinstate the radical meanings of both terms.

Several benefits emerge upon this reconstruction of policy/philosophy. First, philosophical reflection *in* and *on* policy expands and deepens understandings of education, thus strengthening citizens' grasp of the controversies facing policy makers.¹²

Second, a reconstruction of policy/philosophy helps us understand that ultimately "the most demanding questions are not simply scientific, but philosophical."¹³ Questions including 'what education projects should be funded?',¹⁴ 'what should be measured?', 'what ought to be our educational aims in the 21st century?' are intrinsically philosophical, though they are rarely (if ever) framed as such in education policy.

In Ontario, political and rhetorical versions of answers to these questions appear in various policies – the most recent of which is 2014's *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. It was preceded by consultations that posed a number of practical questions that sought opinions. However, consultations lacked philosophical grounding and therefore failed to engage participants in the consideration aims of education, controversies, or perspectives different from their own.¹⁵ The resulting policy's problematic direction included the opinion that "A key area of curriculum that participants feel is under-developed is entrepreneurship education."¹⁶ This led to entrepreneurial education as a prominent (but seriously flawed) feature of the "renewed vision."¹⁷ An alternate approach aligned to philosophical methods would engage citizens-as-consultation-participants in richer dialogues with multiple

¹² Adapted views on science policy in Mitcham and Frodeman, "New Dimensions in the Philosophy of Science."

¹³ Mitcham and Frodeman, "New Dimensions in the Philosophy of Science," p. 9

¹⁴ The annual cost of EQAO is estimated at \$59 million (Marita Moll, *Passing the Test: The False Promises of Standardized Testing*, Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2004, 34) – an expenditure that was not mentioned during the contentious 2014 provincial election when austerity and savings was a major issue of public debate.

¹⁵ "The Next Phase in Ontario's Education Strategy," Ministry of Education, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/BuildNextPhase.pdf> (Accessed July 1, 2014).

¹⁶ The Learning Partnership (2013). *The Learning Partnership's CEO Roundtable: From Great to Excellent: A Response to Ontario's Education Consultations*. Retrieved from www.tlp.ca

¹⁷ For elaboration on the fallacies and problems with the entrepreneurial focus, see Laura E. Pinto, "When Truthiness Prevails: Entrepreneurial Education for Kids," *CCPA Monitor* 21 No. 1 (2014), 18-19.

perspectives in the style of Porto Alegre, Brazil's participatory policy process to promote meaningful dialogue.¹⁸

Third, a reconstruction of policy/philosophy would address Israel Scheffler's call for reflexivity in policy, in which policy makers would engage in critical reflection. Current methods of policy production ignore the need to consider broader implications, democratization, and attention to issues of power.¹⁹ This is a result of a more politicized approach to policy – where policy makers are no longer analysts – instead carrying out the political will of elected officials or uncritically following the directives of OECD or UNESCO in local arenas.²⁰ Even more alarming is policy privatization, where policy production is outsourced to private interests, further eroding the possibility of critical reflection.²¹

What would philosophy as education policy look like? Mitcham and Frodeman suggest applying philosophical inquiry rooted in logic, ethics, politics, epistemology, aesthetics, and metaphysics. Returning to the example of standardized testing, different philosophical fields (*topoi*) would address facets of this policy issue. Logic and argumentation might shed light on issues associated with validity of standardized tests. Questions associated with equity would be addressed through ethics (Who benefits? Who is marginalized by tests and how?). Aesthetics would uncover what values are conveyed within tests, and by testing. Metaphysical questions might point to issues around test structure and content (Whose perspectives are included/excluded? What are the consequences?). The answers to such questions would lead to richer and more complete options – though, undoubtedly as controversial and contested as the diversity of thought among philosophers .

In the preceding examples, we have demonstrated how reviving the deep connection between philosophy and policy means widening and deepening how we confront education challenges. By focusing on their similarities in holistic manner, their close relationship becomes apparent in ways that lead to rich and productive possibilities if philosophers take up policy analysis, and policy-makers engage philosophical practices and inquiry. The resulting radical relationship holds the

¹⁸ For elaboration on Porto Alegre's educative strategies for citizen policy input, see Pinto, *Curriculum Reform in Ontario*.

¹⁹ Israel Scheffler, "On the Education of Policy Makers," *Harvard Educational Review* 54 No. 2 (1996): 152-164

²⁰ Matthew Clarke, "The (Absent) Politics of Neo-Liberal Education Policy," *Critical Studies in Education* 53 No. 3 (2012): 297-310; Stavros Moutsios, "Power, Politics and Transnational Policy-Making in Education," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 8 No. 1 (2010): 121-14.

²¹ For examples of such practice in the UK, see Stephen J. Ball, "Privatizing Education, Privatizing Education Policy, Privatizing Educational Research: Network Governance and the 'Competition State'," *Journal of Education Policy*, 24 No. 1 (2009): 83-100. In Canada, see Pinto, *Curriculum Reform in Ontario*.

promise of education policy that is less incomplete, distorted and unconscious as it otherwise is and may be.

Biographies

Laura Elizabeth Pinto is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology and the recipient of a 2009 Governor General's Gold Medal. Her book, "Curriculum Reform in Ontario" (University of Toronto Press, 2012) was recently shortlisted for the Speaker's Book Award of the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

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