

PES Education's Autonomy SIG rationale

Ninety years ago, Dewey made the courageous statement:

Education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives... Until educators get the independence and courage to insist that educational aims are to be formed as well as executed within the educative process, they will not come to consciousness of their own function.¹

By using the terms 'educational function', 'educators', and 'educative process', Dewey suggests that he does not limit 'education' to an academic discipline but that he refers to a broader sphere of practice (which, admittedly, includes academic inquiry). This broad meaning for education's autonomy is supported by Wilson's argument against basing education on a social or political ideology,² Hogan's claim that "education is precisely a *sui generis* undertaking, or more plainly, a coherent practice in its own right,"³ and Masschelein and Simons' claim that "the school must suspend or decouple certain ties with students' family and social environment on the one hand and with society on the other."⁴

However, due to political and economic forces, it is difficult to envision autonomy for education today—especially as a practical social sphere—as in Dewey's time. Still, some scholars continue to raise and address questions that are relevant for education's autonomy. For example, Wilson asks: "Are there educational values in their own right, perhaps enshrined in the concept of education itself? Or are educational values just a mishmash of moral and political and other values, as these happen to crop up in the practice of education?"⁵ In a similar vein, Biesta reminds us that the Anglo-American and Continental constructions of educational studies differ in their answer to "the question of whether there are forms of theory and theorizing that are distinctively *educational* rather than that they are generated through 'other' disciplines".⁶ Biesta

characterizes the Continental construction as one in which educators “saw insights emerging from other disciplines, including philosophy, as *possible resources* for what they saw as their key task, which was to develop educational forms of theory and theorizing”.⁷ Baldacchino explores education’s ‘immanence’ and ‘agency’⁸ and education’s ‘autonomist immanence’ as distinct from art’s ‘immanence’ (an examination that leads to characterization of art education),⁹ and Yosef-Hassidim calls for education’s ‘agency’ that is based on an ‘educational way of thinking’ and is articulated by educational governance in the form of autonomous and independent ‘sovereign education’.¹⁰

Recently, an academic and scholarly activity on education’s autonomy is gaining momentum. Special alternative sessions on the topic have been taken place at 2019 PES Annual Meeting and 2019 PESGB Annual Conference. Education’s autonomy was planned to be the focus of the 12th Annual Bergen Educational Conversation in April 2020 (cancelled due to COVID-19). And a symposium on the topic is currently being developed for *Educational Theory*.

Despite these developments and disparate attempts to tackle the problem of education’s autonomy, it is still under-theorized; What does autonomous education means? What does independence for educators mean? What are the obstacles and challenges for realizing them, and the ways to face these hurdles? Is education’s autonomy only a means for materializing educational visions or also (and perhaps mainly) an essential characteristic of education itself? Should there be a difference in the autonomy between education as something being practiced (and then the autonomy is of or refers to educators) and education as an academic discipline (and then the autonomy is of or refers to educationalists)? Should there be a distinct meaning for autonomy when it comes to teacher education? And how, if any, do such meanings of autonomy

differ from autonomy for education in terms of the conceptual resources available within education as a discipline versus those of other disciplines such as psychology and philosophy? Addressing these and other questions is crucial in offering a more comprehensive framework for education's autonomy.

A SIG for education's autonomy and promoting scholarly work on this topic are needed and timely for the following reasons. First, reflecting on and advancing education's autonomy holds the potential to assist in protecting education against assaults, by promoting agenda of "standing up for Education" and speaking "educationally for education."¹¹ Second, a theoretical study of education's autonomy is required in order to lead or complement the empirical inquiry on educators' autonomous work, in areas such as educational change¹² and teacher unions.¹³ Third, reflecting upon the meaning, consequences, and general feasibility of educational autonomy is especially timely for philosophers of education in light of recent voices within philosophy of education that seek to identify and emphasize that which is *educational* against that which is philosophical in educational theory.¹⁴ Fourth, exploring education's autonomy in a dedicated SIG has the potential to contribute to theorizing education in general and engaging PES members in re-examination of fundamental theories of education. Finally, scholarly work on education's autonomy is important in order to analyze and support actual developments in educational systems towards autonomy as well as social organizations that call for autonomy for educational systems.¹⁵

Moreover, a SIG dedicated to education's autonomy encourages scholarly work on the topic and brings together scholars in philosophy of education around the world. In this regard it is important to stress, especially when bearing in mind that PES is rather a small organisation, that the education's autonomy SIG is not viewed as an isolated venue for particular discussions or as

a special corner for discussing a particular topic away and disconnected from mainstream discussions at PES. Rather, the education's autonomy SIG is considered a way to generate interest in the topic across the membership of PES. A dedicated SIG for education's autonomy serves as a long-term means to initiate and sustain relevant conversations in a more concerted way, and to invite conference participants to convene and take part in these conversations.

¹ John Dewey. *The sources of a science of education* (New York: Liveright, 1929): 38.

² John Wilson. "Education versus society," *Oxford Review of Education* 23, no. 3 (1997): 333-343.

³ Pádraig Hogan. "Preface to an ethics of education as a practice in its own right," *Ethics and Education* 5, no. 2 (2010): 90.

⁴ Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons. *In Defence of the School. A public Issue* (Leuven: Education, Culture & Society Publishers, 2013): 15.

⁵ John Wilson, "Perspectives on the Philosophy of Education." *Oxford Review of Education* 29, no. 2 (2003): 284.

⁶ Biesta, Gert, "Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: A comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and Continental construction of the field." *Pedagogy, culture & society* 19, no. 2 (2011): 176.

⁷ Biesta, Gert. "Is philosophy of education a historical mistake? Connecting philosophy and education differently." *Theory and Research in Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): 72.

⁸ Baldacchino, John. "ART±EDUCATION: The paradox of the ventriloquist's soliloquy." *Sisyphus: Journal of Education* 3, no. 1 (2015): 62-79.

⁹ Baldacchino, John. "Art's Ped (ago) gies." In j. jagodzinski (ed.), *What Is Art Education?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 163-236.

¹⁰ Yosef-Hassidim, Doron. *K–12 Education as a Hermeneutic Adventurous Endeavor: Toward an Educational Way of Thinking* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹ Biesta, Gert., & Carl Anders Säfström, "A manifesto for education," *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 5 (2011): 542.

¹² Hargreaves, Andy, and Dennis L. Shirley. *The global fourth way: The quest for educational excellence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2012).

¹³ Lois Weiner, "The Teachers' Trifecta: Democracy, Social Justice, Mobilization," in *Teacher Unions in Public Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 189-199.

¹⁴ Gary Fenstermacher, "Should philosophers and educators be speaking to each other?," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 339–348; Marianna Papastephanou, "Method, Philosophy of Education and the Sphere of the Practico-Inert," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009): 451-469.

¹⁵ An interesting recent development in this regard is an initiative that emerges in Israel. This initiative, by prominent scholars and activists, calls for an autonomous secular public education, mostly because of recent (what the organizers consider) undemocratic moves by the government and religious imposition in the system. For a news report on this see:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/group-of-israeli-educators-seek-to-protect-public-schools-from-state-1.7284496> .