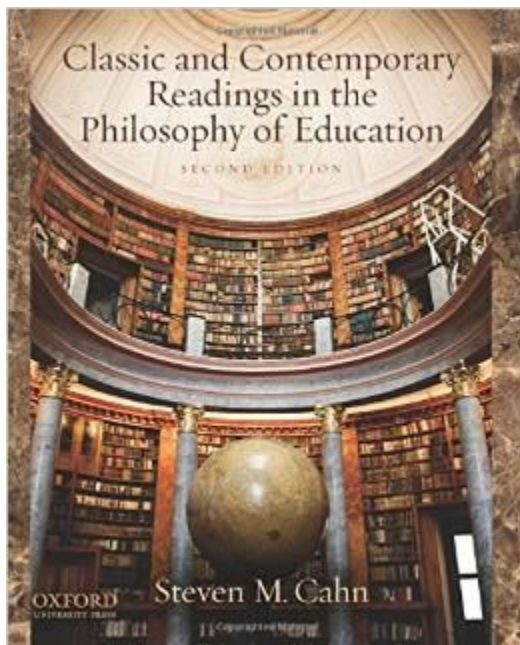


Book Review

Philosophies of Education from the Past and Present

“Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education” by Steven M. Cahn

By Helge Wasmuth



Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education is the second, slightly expanded edition of Steven M. Cahn's same-titled book first published in 1997. Cahn is a renowned editor of philosophical texts who has published more than 20 essay collections and anthologies over the last four decades. The collection's purpose is to collect writings on education by leading figures in the history of philosophy as well as recent thinkers. Thus, it consists of two parts: "Classic Theories" and "Contemporary Issues." In this new version, Cahn included new translations of works by Plato and Aristotle, and expanded selections

from John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and John Dewey. He also added eight new essays: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is the only new piece in the classic section, while selections on various topics (such as school vouchers or home schooling) are added as part of the contemporary readings. Further, Cahn removed previously included selections from Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* and Gareth B. Matthews's *The Philosophy of Childhood*.

Spanning almost two thirds of the book, the first section, "Classic Theories," is the more extensive part of the collection, even if only nine authors are presented. It includes complete and selected texts from classic authors like Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Alfred North Whitehead, and John Dewey. Dewey's thinking is represented most extensively, with selections from three of his works that comprise more than a quarter of the first part's page count (*The Child and Curriculum*, *Experience and Education*, and a selection of *Democracy and Education*). Plato is also represented with three texts (*Meno* and selections from *Protagoras* and *The Republic*). Other classic pieces include selections from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Rousseau's *Emile*, and Whitehead's *The Aims of Education*. These classic authors are introduced with essential biographical and contextual

information, as well as a short explanation of the selected work's importance. Overall, the classic texts cover timeless educational issues, like moral education, teaching methods, child development, female education, and the aims of public education.

The second part, "Contemporary Issues," is divided into three sections: Schools, Teaching, and Curriculum. It is comprised of complete works and selected text from 21 authors reflecting on various current issues, including home schooling, open education, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, feminism, and multiculturalism. The selections present the thinking of several representative philosophers of education, such as Nel Noddings and Maxine Greene. However, this part also includes selections from authors like Michel Foucault and Richard M. Rorty to represent the thinking of philosophers, which is of significance for the field of education. Compared to the classic authors, each text is only introduced briefly.

The first subsection of contemporary readings, "Schools," consists of different selections that are related to the broader topic of schooling. It includes a piece on Summerhill by A.S. Neil, a justification of homeschooling by Patricia Heidenry, and a reflection on the meaning of open education by Kieran Egan. Further, Cahn added two selections to this edition on two current educational policy issues: one on school vouchers by Joseph S. Spierl and one on school choice by Jeffrey R. Henig. The first subsection concludes with selections on democratic education by Amy Gutman and moral education by Israel Scheffler. Altogether, Cahn has included an eclectic range of topics regarding schools in general.

The second and third subsections are more consistent, even if both still cover various topics. The "Teaching" section deals with questions such as what teaching is and the role of a teacher. It begins with two analyses of how teaching can be distinguished from other forms

of learning or activities by Paul H. Hirst and by John Passmore, followed by an older essay on the role of the teacher by Jacques Maritain. The next two selections, excerpts from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, deal with the question of how teaching and education can be (mis-)used as a means to control students. Noddings' *Caring* subsequently emphasizes the importance of the relationship between student and teacher, while the subsection ends with a text by Cahn on a teacher's three major responsibilities. Overall, the second subsection grants an insight in various important questions regarding the meaning of teaching and being a teacher.

The selected works in the third subsection, "Curriculum," discuss the question of which content should be taught in the classroom, with a focus on liberal education and multiculturalism. Sidney Hook's text advocates for liberal education's importance in higher education and defines the elements of such an education, while John Searle's piece summarizes the debate between traditional liberal education and multiculturalism. A further selection from Martha Nussbaum addresses how liberal education can help create citizens in a multicultural world, while an essay from Greene deals with the importance of multiculturalism and what it means to live in a pluralistic society. Rorty's *Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching* does not explicitly focus on the question of what to teach and how; instead, it focuses on how an educational setting should be designed to help students understand that it is necessary to strike a balance between Platonism or vulgar relativism by defining a "community." A selection from Jane Roland Martin serves as a reminder of the fact that a curriculum is always something constructed and therefore changeable, depending on its context and purpose. The third subsection ends with a piece from Wm. Theodore de Bary on how the Asian

classics can be included into the curriculum. As a whole, the third subsection is a broad collection that presents various topics.

A book on readings in the philosophy of education always seeks to answer the all-important question: What is philosophy of education? This question is currently of particular interest, as the status of philosophy of education seems ambiguous. It is possible to speak of the “decreased visibility and influence of philosophy of education on the community of ‘educators’” (Burbules, 2002a, p. 257), while at the same time philosophy of education seems to be “more intellectually dynamic and robust now than it has even been” (Burbules, 2002b, p. 349). Thus, a book on philosophy of education should provide a clear orientation about what philosophy of education actually is. Is it an applied branch of philosophy, the reflections of “great” philosophers on education, does it mean forming a teaching philosophy such as pragmatism, essentialism, or constructivism, or does it refer to the reflection on educational issues from a philosophical perspective? What constitutes philosophy of education and how does it differ from the common thinking about education, teaching, or learning? What distinguishes trivial philosophy of education from the exceptional one that needs to be included in such a collection? Does it need to be academically (philosophically) credible or relevant for educators? And, why do we need philosophy of education at all?

Cahn does not answer these questions explicitly, nor does he offer a clear statement on what philosophy of education is. For him, at least according to his short introduction, the question “what should be the goals of education?” lies “at the heart of philosophy of education” (p. 1). To respond to this question, and the many questions that lead to this answer—such as How do we learn? What is human nature? or How should society be organized?—future teachers need to study

philosophy of education carefully. An in-depth and thorough understanding of these issues cannot be arrived without philosophy of education.

But Cahn’s selections evidently provide another answer to this question. Interestingly, the answer varies between the classic and the contemporary section. The classic theories undoubtedly represent standard reference points in the intellectual history of the field. The selected authors, perhaps with the exceptions of Wollstonecraft and Mill, are no surprise and can be found in many similar readers.¹ Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Dewey are authors routinely included in such collections for an obvious reason: they represent the reflections on education by well-known philosophers. However, are such authors selected because of their specific and outstanding educational thinking, their genuine ideas about education, or because such famous philosophers can give credibility to the field of education? Kant is a good example. Why is Kant’s *Lectures on Pedagogy* included in such a collection if, as Cahn admits, Kant’s “writings in education have been curiously neglected” (p. 153) and he has been without much (maybe even any) influence in the field of education? Is Kant represented because his ideas on education are so exceptional that every future teacher should be familiar with them or because it proves the importance of philosophy of education, if one of the greatest philosophers has thought and lectured about education? Would it not be more helpful if students read about the educational ideas of a philosopher such as Johan Friedrich Herbart, whose pedagogical method had a huge impact on teaching? The same could be asked about Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel, to continue with German-speaking thinkers. Both may not have been philosophers of education in the narrow sense, but their reflections on education have shaped the way we think and design education today. Why include

Mill, who, as Cahn again confesses, “did not write a book devoted to the philosophy of education” (p. 185)? Would students not, at least American students, benefit more from reading William Heard Kilpatrick or—if one wanted to introduce a thinker in opposition to Dewey—Herman Horne? The latter certainly shows the issue of such selections: Which individual’s names and ideas have withstood the test of time and deserve to be included? Such a decision can only be subjective and shows the editor’s preference. But even if one may disagree with some of Cahn’s selections as classic readings, at least it gives an answer to the question about what philosophy of education is. After reading the first part, one may tend to assume that it refers to the reflections on education by more or less “great” philosophers.

As previously alluded to, the second part, focusing on contemporary issues, leads to a slightly different conclusion in this respect and provides a different answer to the question of what constitutes philosophy of education. The authors are not selected as representatives of certain philosophical positions; in fact, some can hardly be called philosophers of education at all. Rather, they are participants and contrasting voices in current educational debates. Philosophy of education in this sense addresses a diversity of issues with varying methods. However, such an approach is not necessarily contradictory to the current status of educational philosophy, as the work done by philosophers of education seems to be enormously eclectic today. Far less agreement exists about what philosophers of education do when they think and write about education—it “is what those who write it and teach it say it is” (Chambliss, 2009, p. 251). While Cahn’s selections correspond to such an understanding of philosophy of education, it is arguable whether all of the selected pieces have real philosophical weight. Although he has included reflections from philosophers like Foucault or

Rorty on education, as well as work by relevant philosophers of education (like Noddings and Scheffler), some articles can barely be called philosophy of education. Heidenry’s *Home Is Where the School Is*, which first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, is one example. Regardless of whether one agrees with Cahn that this reading can spark an interesting discussion between students, does this criterion mean that the work is philosophy of education? Altogether, this leads to the impression that contemporary philosophy of education is hardly more than a debate club for current educational issues, especially compared to the first part focusing on classical thinkers.

A further reason seems to render the second part more controversial. Cahn did not include any real contemporary work. Instead, most of the included writings pre-date the mid-1980s. For example, Maritain’s *Education at the Crossroads* is from 1941. The most recent articles on school choice and school vouchers are both from the 1990s. Such selections demonstrate issues with using older work. While both discuss the topics carefully and deeply, it is questionable whether they are representative examples of the current debates about school choice and vouchers. The meaning of these terms has changed over the last decades, especially their use and associated aims in educational policy. Such changes should be considered in the selected essays. Hening’s article, in fact, anticipates many of the problems that have come with the idea of school choice. However, a more current reflection on this topic seems more appropriate as part of a contemporary reader. Both the lack of philosophical weight and contemporary relevance leads to the question why current authors in the field of philosophy of education—like Nicholas C. Burbules, D. C. Philipps, Mary Ann Raywid, or Harvey Siegel, just to name a few—are not included in this section.

Finally, a few remarks on the book's editing should be added. It is striking that contemporary authors are only introduced with a few sentences, while the work's context and importance are explained insufficiently. Perhaps Cahn wanted the texts to speak for themselves, which has its own value. However, additional information regarding the piece's history or origins, context, and significance, as well as the authors' intentions, would have been helpful. Especially for readers who may not be familiar with the authors, such additional information would have been highly valuable.

Furthermore, the degree of insufficient editing is surprising for such a renowned editor. Cahn does not always provide the year or place of the selection's initial publication. For example, regarding De Bary's *Asia in the Core Curriculum*, he only includes the indication that it has been "reprinted by permission of the author" (p. 447). This is aggravating, as the imprinted *Asia in the Core Curriculum* is not identical with De Bary's article of the same name published in 1996 in *Education about Asia* (volume 1:1, pp. 19-25). Another example is Searle's *Traditionalists and Their Challengers*, which is an abbreviated version of "Is there a Crisis in American Higher Education?" published in the January 1993 issue of the *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (vol. XLVI). A more thorough bibliographical reference would have been desirable, as it would have enabled students to continue their study of the authors' ideas independently more easily. While it is the purpose of such a reader to provide students with quick access to important articles, they should also be encouraged to work academically.

Regardless of the issues mentioned earlier, *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education* is an adequate choice as a first insight into the philosophy of education. For undergraduate or graduate students, it is a good introduction to this

discipline. For advanced learners, the various topics included in the contemporary part of the reader are useful to help familiarize themselves with lesser known voices or opinions.

Furthermore, since *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education* is a collection of primary source materials, it enables the reader to gain insight into the original work of some of the most significant thinkers in the philosophy of education, instead of providing some form of summary of their thinking.

Notes

1 See: R. Curren, ed., *Philosophy of Education: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.

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