

Truth in Education

“Truth” is controversial. It is subject to differing beliefs about its nature, and, too often, “truth” is at the heart of polarizing debates. I recall a school board discussion about strategic planning, which, of course, began with foundational statements about the organization’s purpose, statements of vision, mission, and values, for example. To my way of thinking, growth in knowledge, formation of the intellect, a pursuit aiming at truth as its fundamental object, was obviously part of the purpose of education. I offered this thought and debate commenced. Comments like “my truth may not be your truth” stood in opposition to those of others who, rather than holding a relativistic belief about truth, viewed truth as a correspondence between mind and reality, that objective truth exists apart from “my truth” or “your truth.”

I have found “truth” to be contentious not only practically in situations like the one above, but also theoretically. The provocative idea of “beliefs about truth” was central to the major findings of my doctoral dissertation, a study of sexuality education beliefs. I found that beliefs about truth explained all variability in the range of sexuality education beliefs. My purpose here is to show that truth is relevant to education.

Somewhat unexpectedly, I found that legal theory is applicable to the idea of truth in education in a work by John Finnis (1980), which has become a classic in jurisprudence. My interest in the philosophy of education intersects Finnis’s interest in the philosophy of law.

My reading of Finnis helps to illuminate the thesis that truth is relevant to education. “The good of knowledge is self-evident, obvious,” Finnis asserts (pp. 64-65). He equates “good” with human flourishing and “truth” with “knowledge.” Thus, Finnis equally asserts that the good of truth is self-evident (cf. “innate” vs. “self-evident,” p. 65). Note the intersection with

education. The purpose of education certainly has everything to do with human flourishing and knowledge.

Understanding the relevance of Finnis requires delving a bit into his notions of “good,” “knowledge,” and “truth.” It is important to understand that Finnis, following Aquinas (see note 33, p. 33), holds “that the first principles of natural law, which specify the basic forms of good and evil ... are *per se nota* (self-evident) and indemonstrable.” “Good” is simply that to which all humans are inclined, the object of human desire. But we do desire things that are not really good. So, the basic forms of human good, desires that are truly good, are precisely those conducive to human flourishing. The following passage helps to elucidate Finnis’s equating “truth” and “knowledge”:

Now ‘knowledge’ unlike ‘belief’, is an achievement-word; there are true beliefs and false beliefs, but *knowledge is of truth* [emphasis added]. So one could speak of truth as the basic good with which we are here concerned, for one can just as easily speak of ‘truth for its own sake’ as of ‘knowledge for its own sake’. (Finnis, 1980, p. 59).

The relevance of Finnis to my argument rests on his equation of truth and knowledge. Had I asserted in that board meeting that “knowledge” is relevant to the purpose of education, there would have been no debate except, perhaps, to say, “Yes, but there is more” (the skills of learning, critical thinking, understanding, etc.). There certainly would not have been any conclusion, as there was in the meeting regarding “truth,” that the purpose of education does not have much to do with “knowledge.”

Finnis, in terms of those who deny the good of knowledge, claims “that *any* argument raised by the skeptic is going to be self-defeating” (p. 73). His point sheds light on my thesis that truth is relevant to education. After demonstrating three ways in which propositions can be self-

defeating, Finnis argues that, “The skeptical assertion that knowledge is not a good is operationally self-defeating” (p. 74). Finnis continues:

For one who makes such an assertion, intending it as a serious contribution to rational discussion, is implicitly committed to the proposition that he believes his assertion is worth making, and worth making *qua* true; he thus is committed to the proposition that he believes that truth is a good worth pursuing or knowing. But the sense of his original assertion was precisely that truth is not a good worth pursuing or knowing. Thus he is implicitly committed to formally contradictory beliefs. (pp. 74-75).

Notice again how Finnis uses “truth” and “knowledge” interchangeably. Truth is relevant to education just as knowledge is relevant. You cannot have one without the other.

Truth can be considered relevant to education in two ways. First, truth is an object of education. Additionally, when theorists take education itself as their subject matter, truth becomes relevant as truth *about* education. The argument that education aims at truth is straightforward, and the argument that truths about education exist is really just a corollary of the main argument.

Any skeptic claiming that truth is not a good falls into formally contradictory beliefs by claiming an operationally self-refuting assertion. Regardless of one’s beliefs about truth, one cannot rationally assert that truth is not good, that it has nothing to do with human flourishing. Even if there are as many “truths” as there are individuals, however chaotic such a state of affairs might be, having that truth is fundamental to human flourishing and, therefore, good.

From there, the argument is basic. Truth is a good, knowledge aims at truth as its object, and education is, in part, a pursuit of knowledge. Thus, truth is an object of education. The

thesis, then, that truth is relevant to education is established on this point alone, but are there also truths *about* education?

Is education itself relative to differing beliefs? Or are there fundamental truths upon which any philosophy of education rests? Do criteria exist by which a particular educational theory or philosophy of education can be reasonably judged to be false, at least in part? These questions underscore the importance of whether or not any truth *about* education exists.

The argument for truths about education is really just a necessary corollary of the first argument – that truth is an object of education. Since education is itself a field of study presupposing the pursuit of knowledge about that field, knowledge about education is relevant to education. Because knowledge aims at truth, the very study of education entails a presupposition that truth is relevant to education. Thus, anyone seriously pursuing the study of educational theory or the philosophy of education, while at the same time denying that truth is relevant to education, again holds contradictory beliefs and is not reasonable. Consequently, the pursuit of truth about education is relevant to education.

I do not think those at the board meeting who were uncomfortable with the idea that the purpose of education had something to do with truth would press their point too far. What they meant, I believe, is that education has nothing to do with absolute or final truth because they do not believe that such truth exists. They would not go so far as to say that education has nothing to do with their belief about truth, but, perhaps, they do not want to call that concept “truth.” Perhaps, in accord with Dewey’s experimentalism in which there is never any final truth but only “warranted assertability,” (Dewey, 1938) they would be more comfortable with a definition of education like Dewey’s, that education “is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of

subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1916, pp. 89-90). “Truth” advances with experience, and, perhaps, “experience” and not “truth” is the more palatable concept relevant to education for them.

Regardless of one’s beliefs about truth, whether final or absolute truth exists or not, one cannot rationally deny that truth is relevant to education. Thus, pursuit of truth itself and the truth about education is a worthy enterprise. Neither a school leader at a board meeting nor an educational philosopher need shy away from theorizing about the nature of truth or the relevance truth to education.

References

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