

The Limits of the “Foundations” Metaphor in Education

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Introduction

For decades, the humanistic disciplines—particularly history and philosophy of education—have justified themselves as an essential part of professional training for educators by characterizing themselves as the “foundations of education” (the psychological disciplines in education have often justified themselves in the same way, but that is not my focus here). This justification, I will argue, has been weakened in recent years, and as a consequence the academic home and influence of these fields in education is disappearing. Over time, we could see the virtual end of these fields as subdisciplines in the academy. We need to find new ways of justifying them.

In order to understand why the argument from “foundations” is increasingly problematic, we need to look at various intellectual and institutional changes in relation to each other. The reasons why we ought to rethink the foundations metaphor have to do with conceptual and theoretical problems with that idea, as well as institutional and political changes that make that metaphor less salient as a justification for teaching certain disciplines and perspectives in professional programs in education. These two lines of questioning need to be understood in relation to each other.

The Social Foundations of Education

A reflection on how we got to this point should begin with George Counts’ (1934) book, *The Social Foundations of Education*. For Counts, the “social foundations” were not a field of inquiry or coursework, but

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the actual social conditions that shape the ways we think about and go about educating people (see Tozer & Butts, 2011). If there was a field of inquiry that mapped onto that subject, it would of necessity be interdisciplinary and focused on the question of how to situate our educational ideas and practices in a social context; recognizing that these ideas and practices are themselves the product of particular social and historical circumstances—for example, the conditions of education in, by, and for a democratic society.

It was soon after (1934-1935) that Counts and his colleagues in the newly formed Foundations Division at Teachers College, Columbia, established a set of *required* foundations courses for their professional programs (see Tozer & McAninch, 1986, p. 11). I emphasize that term because it bears examination. “Required” means ostensibly essential knowledge. “Required” means a guaranteed demand for courses (and hence a guaranteed demand for faculty trained to provide such courses). “Required” also means that the students taking these classes are not there voluntarily; they are taking the classes because someone else decided that it would be good for their development. In these three premises we see the basic features of a “foundations” approach, with its benefits, and its limitations. In practice, the rationale for calling certain courses *foundational* is closely linked to the institutional custom of making them *required*. One might ask, “Are these courses required because we consider them foundational, or are they considered foundational because we require them. Which comes first?” At Teachers College, the two happened more or less simultaneously.

A further issue is whether “social foundations” is an area of inquiry itself or an umbrella term for a set of disciplinary fields (typically history of education and philosophy of education, though sometimes more interdisciplinary courses in society and culture) which examine our basic beliefs about the nature and purpose of education. If one accepts the Counts (1934) view of “social foundations” as a set of social conditions, and the importance of studying these (sometimes in the context of a class called something like “School and Society”), then many disciplines may shed light on that question. From this standpoint “social foundations” needs to be an interdisciplinary endeavor. If on the other hand one interprets “foundations” to mean something more like our bedrock conceptions, beliefs, and values about education, then disciplines that are less empirical, like history and philosophy, come to the forefront by shedding light on these conceptions, beliefs, and values; where they come from; and how they change over time.

Finally, the “foundations” of education function politically, by emphasizing normative and theoretical issues over purely technical ones, especially within the practice of teacher education. Issues of professional

ethics, for example, or equality and justice, are typically emphasized more in these courses, and foundations teachers and scholars tend to believe that if it were not for them these issues might not arise in professional training at all. Several scholars from Teachers College who migrated to the University of Illinois put it this way in their own manifesto, “The Theoretical Foundations of Education”:

From almost every quarter, concern is now being expressed about the specialized and technical character of much of American education. . . . This means that an important aspect of professional training is the development of a reasoned and public-spirited understanding of the place and function of the profession in society. (Anderson et al., 1951)

If anything, this is an even greater concern today than it was in 1951. The spread of a technical, outcomes-based, assessment-driven view of teaching has firmly taken hold; as I will discuss in a moment, fewer professional programs have mandatory “foundations” courses at all (Christou, 2009; Colgan, 2017). The one exception might be issues surrounding diversity and multicultural education and required coursework on that topic—but these courses are not necessarily taught by faculty trained in the foundations disciplines. In fact, “multicultural education” is itself a contested and troubled concept (Levinson, 2010). Issues of social and cultural diversity, and their implications for curriculum, instruction, and policy, are certainly more prominent now in schools of education than they were in 1951. And while those courses might be taught by faculty in content area curricula (say literacy specialists) or instructional methods, or policy and administration, such courses inevitably raise some of the same “foundational” issues that have traditionally been part of the formal foundations areas: the relation of schools to society; a commitment to democratic equality, pluralism and inclusion as educational values; and so on. To this extent, certain “foundations” issues—if we want to call them that—are no longer the unique province of faculty trained in certain disciplines.

The Foundations Metaphor

Why the word “foundations”? In Counts’ (1934) original view, it meant something like “the social preconditions,” the actual circumstances that give rise to or support any set of educational institutions and practices. But as the term shifted more toward a body of curricular knowledge and coursework, the relation of the metaphor to a framework of justification shifted. Although its meaning and rationale have rarely been made explicit, “foundational” can mean several things. (This list isn’t meant to be exhaustive, and more than one of these lines of justification can overlap with others.)

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One meaning would be “fundamental,” in the sense of a set of propositions that are necessary preconditions of educational practice: a solid footing upon which to build a larger structure. One might say, for example, that a conception of the aims of education—however vaguely formed or rudimentary—underlies any set of educational activities: Why are you doing what you are doing? What is it all for? From a foundational perspective, vaguely formed or rudimentary ideas about the aims of education are not good enough; they should be the product of conscious thought, planning, and deliberation. That’s what foundations courses are for—developing and justifying those values, and in this sense they lay a *foundation* for everything else one learns how to do. Otherwise, one might argue, practitioners are merely vicariously absorbing a set of aims that others have decided for them, or participating in a passive way in practices (like testing) that implicitly assume certain aims, but without subjecting them to debate and questioning. A 1990 symposium in *Teachers College Record* on “Foundational Studies in Teacher Education” contained several papers that questioned this use of “foundations” (*TCR*, Volume 91, Number 3, 1990).

A second meaning of “foundational” would be “most important.” A key part of foundations courses, one might say, is to inspire commitment and a sense of purpose. They are in this sense crucially important, motivating practitioners to care about what they are doing and to come to regard it as a “calling.” Philosophical principles (such as professional ethics), a sense of historical significance, a commitment to social or political justice, and so on, can all variously underlie this motivation. What is most important, from this standpoint, is to believe in the value of *what* you are doing, and *why* you are doing it, and not just *how* to do it. Many traditional programs in educational philosophy, for example, emphasized the aim that each student should finish coursework with his or her own personal “philosophy of education,” and covered a range of “isms” (realism, idealism, pragmatism, etc.) from which to choose (Phillips, 2001). This justification, in turn, rested upon certain assumptions about teacher autonomy and self-determination in the classroom. Those assumptions look different today, because of the generally “anti-foundational” impact of postmodern theories that have shaped the outlook of many educational scholars. I will return to this issue.

A third meaning of foundational would be “most general.” In this sense foundations coursework provides the shared content across a range of subject matters, levels of education, and practitioner roles. They are required for everyone because it is the only knowledge pertinent to all dimensions and sites of education. Broad normative principles and theoretical problematizations of practice are relevant to everyone who works in the field precisely because the rest of the program content is

more narrowly technical or context-specific. Anticipating a later point, however, it is just this distance from practice that makes this curriculum of dubious value to some students forced to take it.

In all of these cases, the meaning of “foundational” and the institutionalized policy of required courses work together. But the reasons why “foundational” courses are required differ in each case.

The Changing Context of the Foundations Debate

There are several important reasons why these sorts of justifications do not carry the persuasive weight that they once might have.

First, there is an avowed “antifoundational” attitude within many of the very same intellectual disciplines represented within the “foundations of education”—especially, but not only, within the field of philosophy. The ideas of canonical texts, authoritative writers, universal claims about truth and ethics, logically essential bases of knowledge, general principles of a just society, and so on, which are all postulates that undergird the claims of foundationalism in education, have been challenged within those very fields that comprise the foundations areas (Carr, 2006). In these fields, and within society more generally, a heightened awareness of social and cultural diversities, the impact of postmodern skepticism, and at a very broad level the decline of consensus about the aims of society have all produced a fragmentation of belief and value—indeed, for some a deep distrust of the very endeavor of seeking a consensus on such matters—and have created resistance to the notion that there are any basic knowledge or shared values that could comprise an essential curriculum for educators in training. If there is not, then none of the meanings of “foundational” can be sustained any longer. It is worth reflecting upon the irony that intellectual trends within the “foundational” fields is one reason why they have lost their status as “foundational.”

The one strong remnant of the foundations tradition today, as mentioned, is coursework on diversity and multicultural education; critical analyses of inequality, exclusion, and power differentials; and exploration of the formation of identity and community within culturally diverse groups. This is perhaps the one area in which required coursework remains a feature in most schools of education; partly due to an increased awareness and concern about the persistent inequalities that bedevil the educational enterprise. Increasingly courses in the traditional foundations areas (philosophy, history, social science), where they do still exist, have been oriented more around such issues. In part this is an inevitable outgrowth of the increasing diversity of students in schools (and, more slowly, the diversity of teachers); one might say that the challenges of

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diversity and inclusion are the most important “social foundations of education” today, in Counts’s (1934) sense of the term.

Yet two points have to be made here. First, these commitments to diversity and inclusivity may be subject to the very same questions about “foundationalism” and doubts about the generalizability of truth and value as are any other positions. In fact, I would argue, these trends in educational studies are one of the chief factors in the lack of consensus cited earlier. (How do you consistently *require* courses in diversity and cultural inclusiveness, when some students might not want to take them?) Second, and pedagogically, there is sometimes resistance among students to these required courses when they critically examine students’ biased attitudes and practices: sometimes due to students’ reluctance to examine their own potentially prejudiced attitudes or their complicity in a system of injustice, but sometimes also because as required courses they carry the burden that challenging students’ beliefs, attitudes, and values is judged to be “good for them,” even when they resent it (Applebaum, 2010; Boler, 2006). Here again we see the clash between the underlying value of “foundational” coursework and the institutional operationalization of that value, which is to make these courses required. A captive audience may be less willing to take up and seriously engage these types of questions. There is a deep tension here, I believe, between making these courses *required* and expecting students to voluntarily participate in critical self-examination; captive audiences are less likely to be risk-takers.

It is not my primary interest here, but this debate parallels in many respects wider campus discussions about the role of the humanities in liberal education, and the importance of maintaining required general education courses in fields like English, Philosophy, and History (fields which similarly depend on these captive audiences to justify their centrality to undergraduate education, at a time when many graduate programs in these areas are finding it difficult to place their PhDs). The foundations fields in education, of course, partly comprise some of these same humanities disciplines (philosophy and history particularly), and so it is not surprising to see some of the same arguments arise in both contexts—and, unfortunately, to see some of the same doubts and questions raised. The paternalism of making students take required courses because they are presumed to be “good for them,” and the liberal education goals inherent in many of these courses (for example, promoting autonomy) are uneasy partners.

As noted previously, more and more education programs are simply dropping “foundations” requirements. The intellectual rationales for such coursework, weakened as they have been (partly by the work done within those very fields), have not been able to override the issues of cost

and efficiency in streamlining coursework. If the Illinois authors, above, thought that professional training was overly specialized and technical in 1951, they would despair today. Increased state regulation, standardized curricula, test-based assessments, and the deprofessionalization of teaching generally have packed more mandated content into programs focused more narrowly on classroom performance, leaving less room for theory and reflection, let alone critical questioning of the aims and purposes of education (which would necessarily include questioning the nature of some of these very policies).

Just as the establishment of required courses went hand in hand with the development of “foundational” arguments, the loss of those required courses accompanied a decline in the rationale for them. It is not helpful to ask which came first. The consequence over the past few decades is clear: fewer required courses that have to be taught in the foundations fields have meant fewer guaranteed jobs for graduates from programs in the foundations, which in turn have meant the elimination of such graduate programs in most schools of education.

We need to ask ourselves whether simply reiterating the “foundations” metaphor, and trying to defend the related arguments about foundationalism, is the correct response to these circumstances today.

It may be that these justifications were never all that persuasive, and that it was not primarily because of these justifications that foundational coursework took root and persevered in the field of education for as long as it did. What mattered were institutional and political struggles to make certain courses required in professional education programs. These struggles depended on status differences and persistent arguments within programs of education, and were sometimes imposed from the outside by accreditation requirements like NCATE—now CAEP—that (once upon a time, but no longer) identified “foundations” courses as a criterion of a high quality professional program. Professional societies in the foundations fields actively lobbied and sought involvement in program reviews in order to be sure that this criterion was firmly applied. Where the achievement of required status for foundations was a political endeavor, its decline was the product of a drastically different political environment.

Looking Ahead

If the intellectual justifications of certain fields as representing “foundational” knowledge are no longer compelling, and if the accompanying institutional structures of required coursework on which these fields depended for footholds in professional education programs (and for jobs for their graduates) are disappearing, what is possible now? The responses below are suggestions—other responses are possible—but

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unless we engage them the prospects for history and philosophy of education courses (and faculty positions) will be dire.

I want to suggest that these changes, challenging though they are, provide an opportunity—an opportunity for rethinking the purpose and value of these fields and for making a different kind of case about their relevance to teaching and research in programs of education. The fact is that required course structures might have produced a certain complacency about no longer needing to keep making the case about the value and relevance of these fields. Well, no one in these fields is feeling complacent now. Jonas Solits, examining these issues in 1990, concluded that “generating a replacement metaphor for the foundations of education would be an uphill climb” (quoted in Tozer & Butts, 2011, p. 7). But perhaps the answer isn’t finding a new metaphor, but engaging a different kind of conversation.

What might this different kind of conversation look like? First, at a time of increased interdisciplinarity in educational research, protecting disciplinary boundaries may be counterproductive. Fields like philosophy and history, I would argue, can be exemplars of collaborative inquiry: there is an historical, conceptual, or normative dimension of every kind of issue or question in the field of education. But the burden of proof is on scholars in these fields to make that case and to show how their theories and tools of analysis can shed valuable light on other people’s problematics. Sometimes, to be sure, that light is critical: revealing omissions in research conceptualizations, questioning unintended biases or silences, exposing conceptual confusions, and so on. Such criticism can be constructive, and appreciated; but if the critical mode is the only, or dominant modality of collegial interaction, this too can reinforce a perception of presumed disciplinary superiority that creates resentment and resistance—as if the function of the foundations fields were to keep these other areas of activity honest.

Disciplinary modesty, it must be said, does not come easily to the humanities disciplines (or to academics generally). It is far better to approach colleagues as a helpmate and to accept a certain *reciprocity* of questioning and criticism. True collaboration means all perspectives are open to reexamination and revision. Turning this question around, then, such interactions can also yield better and more grounded work within these “foundational” disciplines as well—if we are open to that kind of relationship (Burbules & Knight-Abowitz, 2009).

Second, from a strategic standpoint, it has been beneficial for the foundations fields to align themselves with the increased concern with issues of diversity, equality, and inclusivity that typify many professional programs in education, and where there is still required or strongly recommended coursework. (It is also the right thing to do.) Furthermore,

this has helped attract into the foundations fields a much more diverse population of teachers and scholars—fields that were until recent years overwhelmingly White and male-dominated. However, it is risky to allow these fields, and these courses, to be solely identified with the “social justice” agenda, important as it is. There are too many other reasons why history and philosophy and their concerns are important educationally and professionally.

Third, and following from this point, we need to also represent these fields as comprising useful conceptual, argumentative, and analytical tools. I was brought up professionally, for example, with the mentality that *doing* philosophy of education was more important than *having* a philosophy of education—and from this standpoint it is a democratic endeavor, in which all people can participate. There are no essential texts that yield these skills, no threshold of theoretical vocabularies one must master: the value proposition is of *usefulness*, not foundational importance. I don’t pretend that this is an original insight, but I do suggest that taking it seriously in how we explain and defend the value of what we do—not only in philosophy but across the “foundational” disciplines—requires us to adopt a different attitude, a different tone, as well as a different set of justificatory strategies.

We need to clearly articulate the contributions we make to fostering critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, interpretation, creativity, the formulation of arguments, a capacity for flexible thinking, a healthy skepticism and open-mindedness, a social conscience, a commitment to a professional ethic; and we need to admit that our contributions to these capacities are not unique, but themselves part of a collegial, collective commitment to a certain kind of professional education. We need to show this commitment by enacting these dispositions in the context of *conversations* about educational practice and policy, not as authoritative principles imposed from the outside.

My discussion here is not an argument against required courses. But if there is any justification for required courses, it is in the contributions that they make to developing such valuable core capacities. And it also must be admitted that the foundations disciplines do not have any monopoly on them. An effective justification for required coursework cannot rest on the idea of “academic broccoli”—that although students may resent and resist such courses, others have decided it is good for them, or that while they may dislike these courses now, at some unspecified future point in time they will come to value them and be glad they were forced to take them. It must be recognized how making them required can actually be counterproductive to some of the educational goals they represent, because forcing students to take them can interfere with their willingness to undergo serious self-questioning. Such classes, if they are

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required, must be high quality, well-taught by enthusiastic faculty, and demonstrably effective in producing the beneficial outcomes that they claim. They cannot simply be an excuse for disciplinary turf protection, or a way of preserving tradition.

This shifts the question away from foundationalism to forming a collegial, collective commitment to a certain kind of professional education. Traditional arguments and metaphors, I have argued, do not always help that process, and may actually interfere with it when they come to be seen as taking an academically superior posture. We need to be thinking about the overall design of professional programs that are not only oriented to helping people teach better, but to becoming *better teachers*.

Having said that, these collegial discussions cannot take place unless there are faculty willing to have them: faculty who are well prepared intellectually by strong graduate programs, who are excellent teachers and scholars, and who have the predisposition and the ability to bring their disciplinary training into contact with other people’s problematics. Like any other area of expertise, this requires focused and disciplined study, not a casual generalism; but it also requires an interdisciplinary disposition. Even then there is no guarantee of success because this collegial conversation requires a commitment on all sides—and that needs to be worked at. My focus here is on the audience of teachers and scholars in the traditional foundations fields; but it must be said there is little point in trying to make a different case, no matter how good it is, if others are not listening. We need to open up a different conversation—and that requires a commitment and good will on all sides.

Note

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