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Résumé de l'article

In teacher education programs, there is a prevalent belief that having teacher candidates compose personalized 'my philosophy of education' (MPE) statements is a valuable exercise that prepares them for the teaching profession. This paper argues that the prevailing intentions for, and common practice of, assigning these MPE statements to teacher candidates are problematic because they distort both the discipline of philosophy and the purpose of philosophy of education courses. The argument's first section situates the practice of assigning MPE statements within the context of teacher education programs' strong commitments to social constructivism and the reflective practitioner, and relates the problems associated with those commitments. It then reviews literature that describes the common properties and practices of assigning MPE statements. The second and third sections then develop the arguments that MPEs rely on and reinforce distortions of philosophy as a discipline and misconceptions about the purposes of philosophy of education courses in teacher education programs. Those two arguments share a theme that MPE statements reduce philosophy and philosophizing about education to declaring and clarifying an unexamined personal commitment, and hence drift toward enabling relativism. Finally, the conclusion relates how, in conjunction with those distortions, the use of MPE statements has acquired the function of certifying a teacher's suitability to fit within the status quo. This situation, it claims, unfortunately distracts candidates and others in the teaching profession from developing their critical philosophical skills in responding to the epistemic, moral, and political realities of education and schooling.

The Inadequacies of Assigning "My Philosophy of Education" Statements in Teacher Education Courses

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In teacher education programs, there is a prevalent belief that having teacher candidates compose personalized 'my philosophy of education' (MPE) statements is a valuable exercise that prepares them for the teaching profession. This paper argues that the prevailing intentions for, and common practice of, assigning these MPE statements to teacher candidates are problematic because they distort both the discipline of philosophy and the purpose of philosophy of education courses. The argument's first section situates the practice of assigning MPE statements within the context of teacher education programs' strong commitments to social constructivism and the reflective practitioner, and relates the problems associated with those commitments. It then reviews literature that describes the common properties and practices of assigning MPE statements. The second and third sections then develop the arguments that MPEs rely on and reinforce distortions of philosophy as a discipline and misconceptions about the purposes of philosophy of education courses in teacher education programs. Those two arguments share a theme that MPE statements reduce philosophy and philosophizing about education to declaring and clarifying an unexamined personal commitment, and hence drift toward enabling relativism. Finally, the conclusion relates how, in conjunction with those distortions, the use of MPE statements has acquired the function of certifying a teacher's suitability to fit within the status quo. This situation, it claims, unfortunately distracts candidates and others in the teaching profession from developing their critical philosophical skills in responding to the epistemic, moral, and political realities of education and schooling.

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[1] All authors shared equally in the design, research, and writing of this article, and are listed here alphabetically by surname.

Introduction

In teacher education programs there is a prevalent belief that having teacher candidates compose personalized "my philosophy of education" (MPE) statements is a valuable exercise that prepares them for the teaching profession. This attitude has apparently taken a firm hold in practice: online searches using the search string ["teacher education" and "my philosophy of education"], for example, yield approximately 44,100 results, including at least 421 scholarly results,[2] which shows that this belief and practice is very common, in some form or another, among teacher educators and professionals.[3] As three authors of this article teach philosophy of education courses in a teacher education program, we have found that we often need to explain to teacher candidates and other audiences why we do not have this assignment. Their expectations, which are concurrent with the fact that this topic does not appear in the philosophy of education literature, suggest that there is a mismatch between what philosophers of education do and how (well-meaning) teacher educators and other non-philosophers of education view both this discipline and its contribution to teacher education. Since a major part of philosophy of education's scope is to analyze and question curricular and institutional purposes, it is additionally concerning that the rationales teacher educators use for asking their students to produce MPE statements, and the content of these statements themselves, are unlikely to be scrutinized for their philosophical adequacy.[4] Hence, as we relate below, it appears that MPE statements do not prepare students to engage philosophically with their professional contexts.

Another notable difficulty is conceiving of 'my philosophy of education' in such personal terms. This feature notably exaggerates the power of individual agency at the expense of diminishing the role socialization plays in shaping and sustaining beliefs and ideologies. It therefore contradicts admonitions from anthropologists and sociologists to conceive of individual agency and social structures in a relationship where neither dominates the other (Pelissier, 1991, pp. 86 & 91; Lareau, 2011, pp. 14-15). Perhaps some of this prevailing emphasis on personal agency is a residue of Protestant Christianity's influence–possibly descending from its theological emphasis on personalized faith and reading of scripture–on the structures of common schooling (Barman, 2003, p. 19) and curriculum (Doll, 2008, pp. 190-193) in English-speaking North America. If this hypothesis is true, it indicates this assignment's incongruence with other, incommensurable worldviews, and no less indicates its precarious standing next to anti-colonial initiatives in schooling. This is problematic for many reasons, a few of which we address below, but primarily because the scholarly and professional act of thinking philosophically involves being able to identify and evaluate ideological commitments within the educational relationships, institutions, and systems in which one participates, rather than simply asserting one's beliefs. We maintain that beliefs are important and valid for their independent interest as data for examination, but to hold a commitment and state it as a belief, however necessary this may be for beginning some philosophical work, does not imply disciplined thinking. It is more likely that one's beliefs reflect an (even subconsciously sustained)

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[2] Searches conducted using Google and Google Scholar search engines, respectively, 16 March 2019.

[3] While other professions such as nursing, business, and economics also use MPE statements, and candidates for academic jobs are also asked to produce similar statements, in this paper we have focused specifically on how MPE's are assigned in the context of teacher education programs.

[4] Such an evaluation would ostensibly also require the guidance of an expert in philosophy of education (or another discipline that considers social theory like history, sociology, anthropology, and educational psychology, for example) who can lead teacher candidates past merely stating their beliefs and into rigorously analyzing them.

ideological tradition in one's upbringing and experience, rather than an original, personal philosophy: Thomas Ryan's (2008a; 2008b) findings on the dominance of progressivist thought among pre-service teachers strongly suggests this is the case.

This paper therefore argues that the prevailing intentions for, and common practice of, assigning MPE statements to teacher candidates are problematic because they distort both the discipline of philosophy and the purpose and content of philosophy of education courses. It makes a case that a major flaw in both these distortions is that MPE assignments equate the act of choosing and stating individual beliefs with the acts of thinking philosophically and then concludes by showing how those distortions silently reinforce the dominant cultural norms that underwrite teacher education. The result is that teacher candidates find themselves confronting a situation where they may be (1) permitted to justify their preconceptions about education on relativistic grounds, or (2) compelled to conform to the norms of their program, with neither option being a kind of philosophical thinking.[5]

To establish our argument, we first describe two features of the context within which teacher education programs assign MPE statements: namely, their strong commitments to social constructivism and the reflective practitioner. Next, a review of the literature on MPE statements describes their common properties, including what they are, who uses them, and for what purposes teacher educators assign them. The second major section then develops the argument that MPE statements rest upon distorted assumptions about philosophy as a discipline. That case then relays into the third major section, which argues that MPE assignments contribute to misconceptions about the purposes of philosophy of education courses in Teacher Education. The crosscutting theme between the arguments in those two sections is that MPE statements improperly reduce philosophy and philosophizing about education to declaring and clarifying personal commitments. Finally, the conclusion discusses how those distortions enable the conditions through which MPEs have acquired the function of certifying the suitability of a teacher's character to fit within the status quo, while simultaneously diminishing the value of developing their critical philosophical skills in responding to the epistemic, moral, and political realities of education and schooling.

Role of MPE Assignments in Teacher Education

This paper is a normative critique of the belief that MPE assignments reflect philosophical work that prepares students for the teaching profession. It is not an empirical study that demonstrates phenomena like the rate of MPE's use or teachers' and students' attitudes towards it. Hence, the literature, descriptions, and examples we present here serve only to illustrate the context in which we situate this critique. From this basis, the scope of this paper includes examination of the assumptions that ground any MPE use, its perceived relationship with philosophy of education, and the implications of continuing to use MPEs.

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[5] Our thanks to the anonymous reviewer who contributed this point.

Context: Social Constructivism and the Reflective Practitioner

The practice of assigning MPE statements sits within, and has features in common with, two prevailing ideological commitments within contemporary teacher education: *social constructivism* and the *reflective practitioner*. Both topics are too complex to describe here comprehensively, but in brief, constructivism gained prominence in the 20th century as a debate among educators with commitments to Piagetian (individual) and Deweyan-Vygotskian (social) conceptions of learning (Vadeboncoeur, 1997/2005). Constructivism is a proposition that "individuals create their own new understandings, based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe, and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact" (Richardson, 1997/2005, p. 3). As applied to education, a constructivist would maintain that students do not just learn "expert, public knowledge" but also learn while "using their own personal knowledge to help them think" (Thayer-Bacon, 2005, p. 49). Knowledge is therefore intimately connected with the knower-as-subject and so cannot be separated from selves and communities. Consequentially, knowledge is personally and socially created, and not impersonally discovered (Thayer-Bacon, 2005, p. 49): "it is not thought of as a received, static entity that is separate from the individual … the activities within which knowledge was constructed … nor from the community of people with whom one communicates about ideas" (Richardson, 1997/2005, p. 8). This latter move, which distinguishes the individual construction of knowledge from a socially constructed description, illustrates the difference between constructivism's Piagetian and Deweyan-Vygotskian conceptions.

Teacher educators certainly have many rationales for adopting constructivist commitments. Among them, constructivism promises to help both pre- and in-service teachers "understand their own tacit understandings, how these have developed, and the effects of these understandings on their actions" (Richardson, 1997/2005, p. 10). This way of understanding knowledge and organizing teaching and learning carries a significant advantage for teacher education in that it prompts teachers and teacher candidates to think for themselves about their work (Loughran & Russell, 1997/2005, p. 165). If they are not the passive consumers of what others tell them to do, especially once they leave the context of candidacy and have entered the professional workforce, then their potential for continued growth as actively engaged professionals is thought to be greater. At the same time, however, constructivism also faces two critiques: first, the question of how its emphasis on personal and social knowledge evaluates the use of external, formal knowledge (Loughran & Russell, 1997/2005, p. 4); and second, the critique that it potentially "leads in practice to a maintenance of the status quo" by masking power relationships (Loughran & Russell, 1997/2005, p. 6). The spectre of relativism also likely follows both these problems.

The notion of reflective practice became prominent following the publication of Donald Schön's (1983) book, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action.* It is therefore a relatively more recent trend within teacher education that nonetheless fits well within the prior social constructivist paradigm because it can be used instrumentally to prompt students to think for themselves about their work, and to extend this habit throughout their careers. In short, construction is one of the foundations of reflection. For example, Loughran & Russell's (1997/2005, pp. 166-167) presentation of the guiding principles of the science teacher education program at Australia's Monash University explicitly includes both constructivism and reflection. In our view, Schön's work gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s because it proposed an easily understood framework within which the abstracted theory of teacher training at the university could be applied or made relevant in professional practice contexts. The practitioner who is able to reconsider their plans and actions in light of their theory-informed reflection

upon it would therefore be at an advantage when compared with those who did not acquire this habit. This concept also enables teacher educators to promote the portrait of a teacher whose job requires the praxis of making practical judgments, rather than mindlessly following prescribed directions. Reflection, therefore, presents teacher educators–philosophers of education included–with a promising alternative and positive answer to demands that would reduce the content of teacher education to mere techniques and technical rationality.

As promising as they are, reflection and reflective practice are not unproblematic concepts and Catherine Beauchamp's masterful review of the literature in this area yields two major, related, findings that are instructive here. The first of these is the worry that the reflective practitioner has become a fictitious illusion within teacher education programs. Schön's description of the reflective practitioner is one thing, but the process of its popularization and institutionalization has changed it into a prescriptive concept that is heavily conditioned–as Beauchamp finds from four separate sources–by "the push for accountability in teaching" (Beauchamp, 2015, p. 127). This conditioning, then, "has resulted in forced reflection, or in a routinization of reflective practice that undermines the notion of reflection as deep thinking. The result may be reflective output that is perfunctory, conducted at a surface level" (Beauchamp, 2015, p. 127; Galea 2012; Hobbs 2007, Nagle 2008; Noffke & Brennan 2005)). Ironically, then, reflection and reflective practice have apparently become the opposites of the virtues they are intended to promote, where "the notion of reflective teaching has even deteriorated into … a 'slogan system', with little clarity or adherence to its original aims" (Beauchamp, 2015, pp. 127 & 134; see Noffke & Brennan, 2005, p. 60).

Beauchamp's second major finding arises at this point, where an uncritical acceptance of reflection leads to concerns "about the conforming of student teachers to the dictates of a program of required reflection, noting the lack of authenticity and the 'emotional performativity' that can ensue" (Beauchamp, 2015, p. 134; see MacFarlane & Gourlay, 2009, p. 458). Apparently, on this topic, teacher education programs exhibit features of ideologically conditioned cultures that demand and discipline contrived responses from students. Peter Erlandson offers a confirming analysis here, arguing that there is a need to regard Schön's work as a discourse of control that affects both how novice and experienced teachers reflect. If reflective practitioners are upheld as purportedly better teachers, then Erlandson maintains that, "Following Foucault, the production of knowledgeable students and at the same time of efficient teachers are mechanisms in the technique of making bodies more competent and simultaneously more docile" (Erlandson, 2005, p. 666). This docility is especially evident if one accepts Beauchamp's findings about conformity and slogans, for then they become the mechanisms through which "teachers are gradually disciplined to judge and normalize their everyday practices with tools not from their own practices but from those of their discursive captors" (Erlandson, 2005, p. 668).

Within a teacher education program, then, it is possible to imagine an MPE statement descending from a social constructivist paradigm that informs the content of how one reflectively practices teaching. As an MPE statement fits within these contexts, it likewise inherits and struggles with the same conceptual problems enumerated above. Liu, Tan, and Wong's (2017) description of teacher education at Singapore's National Institute of Education reveals how MPEs emerge within a well-intentioned attempt to encourage both program cohesion and reflective individual practice in teacher education. That program uses the term *philosophy* in two senses, the first of which means its "shared vision" in the sense of its "philosophical coherence" (Liu et al., 2017, p. 198): "A shared vision has to be underpinned by a common philosophy and guided by clear expectations and goals" (p. 199). Second, though, it also requires

candidates "to map out their initial teaching philosophy" that is intended to get students to "see for themselves how the theories and courses are all interrelated, in the same time as they strive towards becoming thinking teachers and professional leaders" (Liu et al., 2017, p. 200). So as this program has a unifying vision, it apparently expects its candidates to construct and reflect upon what they learn so that they can appropriate that vision in their own terms and for themselves. The description of the Institute's practicum model states: "we want teachers to be able to challenge assumptions, formulate their philosophy, work through dilemmas, think pedagogically, investigate problems, and construct their own concept of teaching" (Liu et al., 2017, p. 206). Notice here that there is potentially tension between the program's philosophy in both senses of it being and informing a vision statement, and the personal philosophies candidates maintain as the beliefs that inform how they make meaning from their experiences and aspirations. As Liu et al. (2017) only describe this program and promote its merits, it is possibly beyond the scope of their work to identify its internal tensions and propose solutions to them. However, their presentation here illustrates examples of the conceptual problems raised above: What happens if teacher candidates have beliefs that do not conform to the program's vision? Is it possible for teacher candidates and their instructors to "challenge [the] assumptions" (recalling page 206) of their program's dominant values? So if there are problems with the use of social constructivism and reflection in teacher education, there are apparently similar problems in kind about the use of *philosophy* when it is adopted in sloganistic and superficial ways that do not explore tensions like these.

Review of the MPE Literature

While the assignment of writing a personal teaching philosophy statement is thought to be an important tool for the self-development of teacher candidates, the relationship between MPE statements and the discipline of philosophy of education is not necessarily what one might expect. Both general online searches and searches of the academic literature reveal that personal philosophy of education statements are being taken up in several ways. First, teacher educators–though not specialist philosophy of education instructors–use them for their role in preparing pre-service teachers; second, teacher candidates use them as evidence of their preparation for and beliefs about teaching; and third, schools and school districts use them as expressions of how teacher candidates' value statements align with the school community's ideological commitments.

A survey of university teacher education programs finds that most of them offer resources for students to write MPE statements. These resources describe such statements as: narratives that include conceptions of teaching and learning; descriptions and justifications of one's teaching style; and evidence of reflective thinking about one's educational beliefs. Descriptions of the purpose and content of these statements are predominantly technical–in the sense of following instructions rather than thinking for oneself–as are the descriptions of how to write them. Resources and articles for personal philosophy of education statements tend to offer practical, step-by-step, how-to advice, and most offer sample statements that students can look to for guidance. Generally, these resources direct the content and practice of writing MPE statements toward preparing students professionally for a job search and as an aspect of one's job application portfolio (Beatty, Leigh, & Dean, 2009; Delandshere & Arens, 2003).

A search of the academic literature returns far fewer entries, and it is a rare finding in the philosophy of education literature, which coordinates with the above finding that MPE requirements tend more toward the technical than the theoretical. From what little the academic literature does reveal, students

arrive at their personal 'philosophies of education' in "courses organized around key essential questions, double-entry journals, and students' considerations of their educational autobiographies" (Murrow 2008, p. 230). Teacher educators predominantly describe MPE statements as belief or value statements about teaching and learning, which may include thoughts about the nature of the child, pedagogical commitments, and education for social justice (see, for example, Murrow, 2008, p. 236). A recent study of ethics education in preservice teacher education programs found that 93% of their instructor participants (n=58) ranked the item, "Help students develop their own philosophy of education" as either "important" or "very important" as a teaching and learning objective for professional ethics courses (Maxwell et al., 2016, pp. 141-142). Teacher educators therefore view MPE statements as an organizing schema of beliefs through which pre-service teachers provide a "clear, concise account of the author's approaches to teaching, providing a sense of who the person is as a teacher and what s/he values" (Alexander et al., 2012, p. 24).

Another intention of MPE statements is to offset what is referred to as a "methods fetish" (Bartolomé 1994, as cited in Pike, Bradley, & Mansfield, 1997, p. 125) in teacher preparation programs–"a belief that particular methods will automatically resolve complex classroom issues"–when taught in abstraction from the practical realities of teaching (Pike et al. 1997, p. 125). Predicated on the assumption that theoretical pedagogical belief and practical classroom experience are disconnected, the development of personal philosophies of education through practicum experience attempts to bridge this gap and offer evidence of "implementation of the philosophy" (Van Note Chism, 1997-98, p. 4). Such articulations emphasize and reify the purported theory-practice divide by arguing that "theoretical philosophy … must temper that philosophy with realistic teacher-practitioner experiences" (Pike et al., 1997, p. 126). One implication of this approach is that it casts philosophical thinking as not a useful or purposeful activity in and of itself, and rather that it serves only as a rationalization or prescription for what is experienced in the classroom. A second is that existing practices and "realistic … experiences" (Van Note Chism, 1997-98, p. 4) have no relationship to an often tacitly or even subconsciously agreed upon philosophical basis; philosophy in this case is based on an ideal that is unattainable in reality and is therefore separate from practical applications.[6] We maintain the contrary view, that this emphasis on bridging a theory-practice divide unfortunately only entrenches it, and that MPE assignments are therefore unhelpful, in this respect, because they only reproduce the problem they seek to redress.

Teacher educators also talk about the importance of developing personal philosophy of education statements as part of an education in social foundations and as part of a social pedagogy in this field that aims to make "visible student meaning making and knowledge construction in an area often associated with knowledge mastery," though oddly without mentioning the discipline of philosophy (Murrow, 2008, p. 230). Proponents of autobiographical reflection in student learning assert that "self-reflection and self-knowledge encourage critical thinking and problem solving." These proponents seem to court the conceptual slip from disciplined pluralism to relativism with the suggestion that student reflective work is part of a "decentering of the master narrative" in courses traditionally structured around a particular intellectual canon (Deever, 1993, p. 47, as cited in Murrow, 2008, p. 232; see also Bushnell & Henry, 2003).

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[6] It should be noted here that in the field of education theory is disempowered not only by the heavy focus on practice, but also when student beliefs about practice are limited by (their and/or their program's view of) the conditions of teaching. Likewise, in-service teachers are often constrained by expectations to affirm and perform standards of practice that policymakers develop.

Beatty at al. (2009) support the use of MPE statements as part of a commitment to reflective practice, stating that: "A well-articulated teaching philosophy statement can surface assumptions and values which are easily taken for granted, offering the opportunity to examine critically the bases for those assumptions and values as well as the consideration of alternatives" (2009, p. 113). It is important to note that their view is carefully qualified with a prescription that the MPE be written with strong attention to criteria that sustain its philosophical rigour, and especially that it use actual content and practices within that scholarly discipline. However, Delandshere & Arens (2003) find that practitioners do not always meet this laudable condition; while these statements bear the philosophy of education label, it is often very difficult to find foundational ideas relating to educational philosophy within them. It follows, therefore, that the content and practice of teaching philosophy statements are most often undertheorized from a philosophical perspective (Alexander et al. 2012; Beatty et al. 2009). What the content and practices surrounding MPE statements do generally have in common is the suggestion that they express the author's beliefs about education, whether or not developing those beliefs involved philosophical thinking.

From the perspective of pre-service teachers, regardless of their scholarly merits, MPE statements communicate educational ideologies to potential employers and demonstrate candidates' alignment with certain educational principles and practices. They provide prepared answers to interview questions that can be adapted to a district's educational ideology and specific needs for best application (Pike et al., 1997, pp. 125 & 127). The literature suggests that students unprepared with MPE statements will be unprepared for job interviews, as such a statement will help them "avoid simplistic, patchwork approaches to professional competence" (Pike et al., 1997, p. 125). Examining student perceptions of MPE assignments, however, reveals their potential to distort the discipline of philosophy and the purpose of philosophy of education courses. Murrow reports how one student understands their course's value in terms of how "being introduced to the philosophies of various educators, discussing certain issues amongst classmates, and observing educators and students in action, has helped in developing my philosophy of education" (2008, p. 237). The distortion of the discipline is further evidenced in the literature through the frequent equation of the term *philosophy* with *belief system* (Pike et al. 1997; Beatty et al., 2009, p. 100).[7] Presented as declarative statements of beliefs about teaching and learning, personal philosophy statements are often made without connection to foundational ideas about schooling (Delandshere & Arens, 2003, p. 232).

One of the authors of this paper still has her teaching portfolio that she produced as an assignment in her Queens' University teacher education program in 2006-2007, and it contains her MPE statement:

My Professional Philosophy

My classroom is student-centred; I am a facilitator of learning. I create a classroom that is an inclusive and safe space but also a place to overcome ignorance and injustice through open dialogue and culture sharing. I am a teacher that responds to all learning styles and the individual needs of every student. My classroom is a community which encourages the respect of self, others, and the environment. (Harvey, 2007)

This sample demonstrates the lack of foundational connection in MPE statements; the purported philosophy comes from the student and does not indicate philosophical thinking but is rather an

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[7] Beatty et al. point to the need for grounding any belief statements in the discipline of philosophy (2009, p. 101)

expression of personal beliefs. The statement is a reflection of popular language or buzz words such as the terms *student-centred* and *facilitator of learning*, but it is void of any reasons, or foundational background, discussing from where these concepts are drawn or how they are supported. For instance, it does not consider why these commitments are preferable, the foundational thinkers who support them, and what other options are available.

In a collection of MPE statements by Samoan teachers in the University of Hawaii's teacher education program, authors blend reflections, beliefs statements, and pronouncements of personal philosophy in order to show that "[r]eflective practice and dialogue are essential parts of the evolution of constructing a teaching identity," (Greene et al., 2006, p. 33) and that "[t]he iterative nature of identity sculpting is, at least in part, what allows us to grow, to recreate and transform our fundamental beliefs and enactments as teachers" (p. 34). One teacher named Saimaura reflects that, during this teacher education program, "my philosophy, ideas, and concepts completely changed" and she recounts her previous approach as "giver of knowledge" had been revised and replaced with the belief that she should be a "facilitator of learning" (Greene et al., 2006, p. 30). Another author, Denise, writes that "new teaching ideas such as inquiry learning, constructivism, and integrated curriculum … made their way into my classroom" (Greene et al., 2006, p. 32). Both students express laudable beliefs about what it means to them to be teachers, but as expressed neither are grounded in any philosophical literature. A third author, Faleula, writes of how her approach to student misbehavior used to be punitive, but she took on a "new" teaching strategy of using praise and rewards to change it; in her MPE statement she remarks that it "takes a lot more patience to teach this way, but it works" (Greene et al., 2006, p. 32). Further on in the same statement, though, she describes the punitive measures the teacher education program's coordinator took to manage teacher candidate behaviour in her program, and she reflects on how "it was painful, but we learned the hard way that when the doctor speaks, her words are law in the classroom" (Greene, et al., 2006, p. 32). From this anecdote, it is apparent that the virtue of patience taught in that program's formal curriculum clashes with its hidden curriculum of conformity to institutional practices and the dictates of authorities in positions of power. It may be needless to say, but in her MPE statement this conflict is neither taken up theoretically nor subjected to philosophical critique.

The literature suggests that most approaches to personal philosophy of education statements do not align with the purposes of a philosophy of education course if these purposes, while admittedly contestable, generally share two purposes. The first of these would be aiming to teach philosophical thinking, show how the canon and its critics have shaped and critiqued historical and contemporary institutions, and reveal the philosophical underpinnings of educational theory and practice. The second would be an avoidance of reifying the data of raw autobiographical narratives and beliefs as disciplined philosophy.[8] It further shows that MPE assignments sit predominantly outside philosophy of education courses, where teacher educators promote them as a link between theory and practice, and suggest that the formally reflexive creation of MPE statements might be assessed as philosophical reflection and is thus important in processes of enhancing new teachers' self-awareness (Beatty et al., 2009). This research indicates, however, that while any well-used personal philosophy of education practices require intellectual rigour and a firm foundation in philosophy itself, the philosophical or even more broadly

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[8] In additional parallel to the philosophical problems observed here, from the perspective of an empirical researcher this use of raw assertions to inform MPE statements is problematic to the degree that it is distanced from any preparation and training in autoethnographic method to govern its data collection, analysis, and reporting. It amounts to elevating unanalyzed data to a conclusion or theory.

theoretical (to the degree that other disciplines inform philosophy) underpinnings of personal philosophy statements are often overlooked. The more that this observation is true in any practice, the greater the potential for the dominant culture's philosophical commitment to tacitly assert itself and so be re-inscribed without recognition or critique: a fact that is ironic given the intentions of some MPEs, as stated above, to decenter the master narrative (Deever, 1993, p. 47, as cited in Murrow, 2008, p. 232).

Distortions of Philosophy as a Discipline

As the review of literature initially reveals that MPE assignments distort philosophy by under-theorizing (and reproducing) the presumption of a theory-practice divide, and by establishing conditions that enable a slip from disciplined pluralism to relativism, this section looks closer at each of these two themes and their implications.

Theory - Practice

It is perhaps no surprise that MPE assignments are fraught with the assumption of a theory-practice divide, as the pre-service teachers who write them anticipate getting jobs teaching in schools. The MPE assignment is designed to bridge a presumed gap between the 'theory' of philosophy, and the 'practice' of teaching. This somewhat hasty conceptual distinction leaves no room for other possibilities with which to frame the presumed theory-practice matrix: for example, those where philosophical knowledge depends directly on practical concerns. In any case, when one unproblematically assumes a theory-practice divide, it becomes exaggerated and leads to distortions of philosophical knowledge in at least three ways.

First, MPE assignments tend to treat philosophy as a source of abstract knowledge to be made practical for real life (Pike et al., 1997, pp. 127-128). They then suggest crossing an alleged great divide between the practicalities of teaching and the rarified environments in which philosophy exists, but in doing so reduce philosophy to abstract thought about preparing for real world practice. This conceptualization overlooks the variety of critiques within philosophy regarding abstraction, its purposes and problems, and the ways that philosophers think about the practical implications of their insights. Rather, MPE assignments ask students to write them in direct anticipation of the job market (or at least strongly imply that they should approach the assignment this way), and often take the form of reflection on the pre-service teacher's course of learning as a crucial moment in the development of a 'teaching style' that fits within that market context. What matters is not a thorough understanding of the educational priorities and commitments of foundational philosophies themselves and their implications for practice, but only how a reductive account of such philosophies might be aligned with the day-to-day work of teaching that is just around the corner.

Second, MPE assignments cast philosophical knowledge as a resource to be utilized, rather than as productions of disciplined thought. This orientation is particularly evident when MPE assignments are conceived as autobiographies of learning and as reflections on learning about teaching (Murrow, 2008, p. 232; Bushnell & Henry, 2003). When conceived as only a technical resource (in the tacit service of one's ideological commitments), philosophical knowledge only figures as selected contributions to the pre-service teacher's professional self-understanding. In this case, philosophical ideas are considered

alongside other sources of insight such as practicum experience or courses on the methods of teaching (e.g., assessment, curriculum, management, etc.). As these approaches to teacher education and philosophy of education wrongly treat philosophical knowledge as an eclectic container of resources containing polished nuggets of insight, they distort philosophy's actual work by overlooking the evaluative criteria that are essential to producing the philosophical knowledge cited. Rather than evaluating philosophical knowledge according to standards of rigour, truth, or utility, this approach only evaluates it according to the single criterion of how well it can be integrated into the professional self-image of pre-service teachers. The parallel miscalculation in other teacher education courses would be to ask students to write statements about 'my curriculum' or 'my psychology,' for example.

Additionally, this 'resource utilization' approach sets aside the history of philosophical thought, which is a crucial key to knowing how thought develops and changes in the discipline of philosophy. While pre-service teachers do not need to be historians of philosophy, they must understand that philosophical ideas are products of a history of development and disputation and are not context-free bits of knowledge suitable for direct application to teaching. While it is possible for a philosopher to claim to have finally articulated a (tentative) truth (and such aspirations might be essential to philosophy), each philosophical statement only stands in relation to those that have preceded it. Thus, to treat various expressions in the history of philosophy as independent, context-free resources for self-reflection ignores the historical relations that are essential to their making sense, and disregards how the discipline works. Treating philosophical knowledge as a resource in this particular way is especially problematic when the pre-service teachers' self-images tend to be shaped more by the ideological determinations of the job market than by the quoted philosophers, who, if considered on their own terms, might critique the ideologies of the educational marketplace. Philosophy has a long history of challenging the perpetuation of naïve ideological or discursive systems, and so when an MPE statement diminishes the evaluative criteria articulated within philosophy and the historical context of philosophical ideas, it has the effect of undermining two of the main ways that philosophy goes about its business.

Third, MPE assignments rest on a presumption that philosophy is a kind of specialized knowledge that informs professional practice. Students only write MPE statements during and after their teacher education coursework, which means that this writing will be influenced by their initiation into particular sources of knowledge and particular ways of talking about that knowledge: social constructivism and reflective practice, for example. The result is that pre-service teachers end up demonstrating a facility with particular ideological and epistemological discourses that are current in education, rather than a mastery of, or a deep engagement with, the wider field, including the broader historical context within which what is momentarily current sits. A successful MPE paper therefore seems to be a kind of symbolic handshake that confirms the pre-service teacher's initiation into the discursive milieu of the job market, rather than their critical engagement with it and its discourses. On this point, the charge of elitism that sometimes looms over the discipline of philosophy takes on a kind of irony. Even while MPE assignments are ostensibly aimed at decentering master narratives (Deever, 1993, p. 47, as cited in Murrow, 2008, p. 232) and allowing every student to participate in philosophy, they risk reinforcing philosophical specialization, whereby the foundational philosophical theory that informs their content is only accessible to those studying for a teaching qualification. While it is hoped that the intended democratization of philosophy would result in a rich variety of responses, MPE statements end up drawing on the same few sources–if not those studied in class, then those preconceptions that facilitated entry into the program–in the same few ways according the ideological commitments of the university

and prospective employers. Hence, this selected set of information and discourses displays some features of a canon as that term means both a selected list and a measure, law, or norm. We acknowledge that philosophy is not always easy to learn, but this reality, rather than limiting philosophy to an elite few, can be reasonably cast as a motivation for philosophers of education to teach it well to pre-service teachers. Rather than making a specialized discipline the domain of an elite few, philosophers of education aim toward and are active in training all pre-service teachers in the difficult practice of meaningful engagement with widely available sources of philosophical thought.

The exposition of each of these three distortions of philosophical knowledge suggests that if there is indeed a theory-practice divide between educational philosophy and teaching, its under-theorization in MPE assignments leads to its perpetuation. Perhaps one of the roles of philosophy of education is to provide a more adequate account of the relationship between philosophical work and teaching.

Sliding From Disciplined Pluralism to Relativism

That philosophical knowledge can be claimed as 'mine' (in the "My Philosophy" construction) implies a tangle of issues including whether or not there can be a plurality of 'truths'. One thing philosophers do is argue about this question. MPE papers gloss over this debate with the affirmative answer implied by the requirement that each pre-service teacher should hold their own philosophy: a belief that is congruent with the commitments to constructivism and personal reflection outlined above. MPE assignments imply a claim that my philosophy of education is not necessarily yours and that there is no need to resolve any conflict between them. However, insofar as they do not ask students to address the presence of alternatives from which some educational philosophies have been selected over others or require them to consider how to coordinate reasonable and incommensurable traditions, they also ignore their elevation of individual choice as the arbiter between them. The result is a slide from a disciplined pluralism where diversity and choice are matters of philosophical reflection among reasonable alternatives, to a relativism where real difference or even incompatibilities between philosophical ideas disappear into the simplicity of individual choice.

This conceptual slip toward relativism can be examined according to the rubric of contestability. Philosophers argue with one another. Everything that they say or write is subject to analysis, argument, revision, and change. This disciplinary feature no less holds true in the presence of diverse and incommensurable ideas; in this case, philosophers even contest the possibility of pluralism as the simultaneous validity of incommensurable ideas. There is always some posited (at least tentative) truth at stake even long after the renunciation of any claim to absolute truth. By contrast, the MPE assignment does not argue for, but rather assumes, a plurality of valid perspectives simply by its being required from each individual in entire cohorts of pre-service teachers. Since MPE assignments inevitably wade into the contested waters of pluralism, the teacher educators who choose them must require students, and be prepared themselves, to address the presence of alternatives in order to avoid the relativism of statements deriving authority simply from having been expressed.

Contestability depends on the mutual acknowledgement among those who participate in philosophical discourse of certain evaluative criteria such as correctness, rigour, and objectivity. One philosopher can always say to another, "You are wrong, because ..." However, the very nature of the MPE assignment as a personal statement means that it can be neither incorrect nor contested if it is to have any substantive meaning in real life. Recalling that MPE statements are also a contractual

'handshake' with the dominant culture of schools and a credentialed profession, this apparently paradoxical union of strongly relativistic individuation with a normative General Will seems to indicate either that there is a prevalence of conflict-aversion among teacher candidates, or that the candidates are attracted to and selected for the profession according to their fitting a desired ideological disposition. The former possibility is hypothetical; Ryan's (2008a & 2008b) findings about teacher candidates' overwhelming tendency toward progressivism supports the latter. Nonetheless, the MPE assignment's emphasis on personal avowal relieves the pre-service teacher from grounding the cited sources of their philosophy in any particular argumentative structure or evidence. In the absence of such evidentiary support, the validity of MPE statements derives simply from their having been expressed, in which case they might better be described as *belief statements*. If this is indeed the case, then the obscuring of philosophy of education that results could be remediated through rebranding of MPE statements to reflect their actual substance, and thereby distinguish them from the discipline of philosophy.

The spectre of relativism only appears as the inverse of a philosophical drive toward absolutism, yet writing can still be rich, meaningful, and even transformative, without a second thought for contestability. We can imagine statements, based on the language of, "I believe that…" that would (a) deal with theoretical, experiential or other sources that address real issues in teaching, and then (b) integrate these sources into a coherent personal statement. Such statements of belief would not be intended to be philosophically resolved, but would nonetheless provide real value for pre-service teachers, their instructors, and potential employers, as stated above. In the best case that both (a) and (b) are satisfied, a detailed, nuanced, and sophisticated statement of personal belief might emerge. Even so, as long as its authority derives only from individual choice, it will not be amenable to contestation by the reader, no matter how robust an understanding of choice is involved. It will not be philosophy.

Distortions of the Purpose of a Philosophy of Education Course

Teachers delve into the moral realm (they are charged with modelling right action), their work is clearly social (they are under public regulation for this reason), and regardless of whether they announce their positions on hot topics of the day their work is inevitably political. Every interaction with students presents such endless possibilities that a personal manifesto written without critical examination or evaluative criteria would be far too narrow in scope to make it a rigourously practical endeavor. So, if any philosophy course for pre- or in-service professionals does not focus on the writing of one's professional belief statement, then it must be based on something else.

Part of an education faculty's mandate is to apprise teacher candidates of the most up-to-date and effective curricula (what students should learn to achieve certain aims) and pedagogies (the ways in which teachers should deliver these curricula to achieve these aims). Although this description is simplified, it sufficiently makes the point that these elements necessitate various approaches for understanding and engagement. Nel Noddings (2016) explains that one "cannot decide entirely by empirical methods–methods of experiment and observation–what the aims of education *should* be" (p. 1, emphasis original). There are also philosophical methods that are required for deep and thoughtful participation in thinking, action, and reflection in the field of education. In her conference presentation entitled, "On the Margins and Marginality of Philosophy of Education," Claudia Ruitenberg (2016) compares the function of a footnote in a text and the role of philosophy of education in educational research. Ruitenberg argues that

other educational research provides knowledge of the phenomena on which philosophy of education ruminates and raises questions, but philosophy of education "can provide more than a commentary from the sidelines; it can insert a deliberately marginal discourse that interrupts and makes curriculum, policy, and research writers stutterers in their language" (Ruitenberg, 2016). Ruitenberg describes the main job of the footnote as an interruption, a nagging element that annunciates "that which must not be said" (Derrida, 1980/1987, p. 446); something that perhaps makes it a little harder to read the main text, but adds a necessary dimension to our understanding of what it is we are taking in (Ruitenberg, 2016).

It is our view that a philosophy of education course performs an analogously interruptive function in teacher development. Learning to practice philosophical thinking and interaction with philosophical texts on education has, for teacher candidates, the potential for a similar impact. It is not an effort to dismiss empirical research, but rather it aims to encourage the practice of philosophical questioning in a way that enhances and elucidates but also intrudes, like a footnote, and aims to be the voice that cuts in and calls the reader's attention elsewhere (Ruitenberg, 2016). MPE assignments in philosophy of education courses contradict these purposes. Rather than drawing candidates' attention to the possible problems or gaps in their worldviews or the current systems that influence education and schooling, an MPE does little more than reinforce teacher candidates' preconceived expectations and asks them to recapitulate what they believe or have been told their prospective employers want to hear. It cuts philosophy and its methods out of the discussion.

Many theorists have demonstrated what happens when schooling is structured so that only teachers are knowledge keepers and moral adjudicators, while students are envisioned as vessels to be filled with that knowledge and compliant followers of institutional authority's judgment (Freire, 1970/2005; hooks, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981). Others have also argued that this approach to teaching diminishes curiosity and creativity and has a negative impact on understanding what it means to be a citizen in a Western political context (Giroux, 2005; Kohn, 2006). Democratic pluralism requires dissenting views and the ability to question in a way that puts the critical voice at risk while it speaks truth to power (Foucault, 2008). Current curriculum calls for students to learn skills that support their democratic participation (see for example, British Columbia, 2015, p. 2) and so if teacher educators are to support students in their efforts to think, be critical, and be the dissenting voice when they are called to do so, they need to support teacher candidates so that they can think critically past the point of superficial self-reflections about their own practice and into a critique of the ideological system in which they work. This is not to say that each budding professional needs to condemn contemporary schooling, but rather that part of the philosophical method is being able to evaluate the political nature of educational statements, since even those that appear 'neutral' are politically positioned in line with the dominant narrative (Freire, 1985).

The purpose of a philosophy of education course is not to indoctrinate students into any one particular system and, while we agree that an instructor's and institution's biases are unavoidable, we maintain that part of the reason for doing philosophy is to be able to identify, evaluate, and reflect on these biases and the narratives that support them. An essential element of this praxis is not only the ability "to 'get' at a gut level the paradigm that there are paradigms, and to see that that itself is a paradigm", but also to understand that there is not a paradigm that is 'True' and to let go of the need to be teaching and living in the 'right way' (Meadows, 1999, p. 19) as an MPE dictates. The purpose of studying A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*, Plato's *Republic*, or Maria Montessori's system is not (or not necessarily) to encourage teacher candidates to adopt those approaches to education and schooling as their own. Rather, it is, among many other possible and praiseworthy objectives, to help students become proficient in identifying

existentialism, idealism, and positive freedom when they see them, and no less to see the efficacy of studying works like these for critiquing prevailing and competing systems. They also need to be able to know the problems within these authors' works. Moreover, by engaging with critiques of education, such as what is found in the works of Jane Roland Martin, Paulo Freire, and others, they may demonstrate the various approaches to responding to the theoretical underpinnings of education and schooling in a philosophically adequate way. Socrates remarked that philosophy was the examination of life, our habits and conventions, the pursuit of truth, and even the questioning of ruling opinion rather than thoughtless conformity without reason (Plato 1981). Philosophy is a method of thinking in which the philosopher is both "an element and an actor" in the process of questioning what constitutes the present (Foucault, 2008, p. 12). Philosophy is a process in which all teacher candidates can engage precisely because theory cannot be separated from practice. There is a danger of undermining the discipline of philosophy but also the teaching profession itself when an endeavor that is unavoidably both moral and political becomes scripted and the text is separated from its undertaking (Purpel, 1999). Adeptness in the discipline is meant to sustain continuous thinking; philosophy is thinking-in-action, it is thinking about thinking, and without its call to question current research, practices, and daily moments in the educational domain and beyond, our society risks a stillness that has the effect of limiting change, transformation, and growth when these are necessary. Students moving into the teaching profession need to know *that* and *how* it is inherently political.

Engaging in the act of philosophy calls us to examine ourselves and the world around us for reason, morality, and truth, as well as to question dominant paradigms and the origins of values, goals, and beliefs. Our sources of belief should not be stated and accepted without careful scrutiny, and our own understanding of the ways in which these sources complement or conflict with our own thinking should not be without thoughtful consideration. So MPE assignments do not merely discourage philosophical conduct, but ironically also ask students of education to play 'the schooling game,' which is to figure out what the teacher wants to hear, echo the 'right' answer, and meet or exceed expectations in order to win (see Illich, 1970). Any assignment that aims to have students explore the ways in which thinking, action, and reflection either connects or disconnects should make the rest of what is gleaned in a teacher education program a little harder to read and less palatable, because by interrupting a too-easy reliance on the familiar, it should prompt them to ask challenging questions. To the degree that philosophy of education as a discipline and course in teacher preparation programs exposes and critiques 'the schooling game' and the prevailing ideologies within education (including teacher education), the greater the likelihood that it presents a contrary, contrasting point of view to prevailing trends in those places.

Conclusion

The arguments that MPE assignments distort the discipline of philosophy and the purposes of a philosophy of education course converge on the point that MPE statements are often, at best, statements of belief. At worst, they risk coercion to the degree that they do not admit a sufficient plurality of views that could critique its host society's dominant ideology, including that of teacher education programs. In this way, the problems of MPE statements are congruent with, and descend from, the conceptual problems of their constructivist and reflective practitioner contexts. Moreover, if MPE assignments and statements rested on a conception of philosophy that regarded it as a discipline, rather than a synonym

for beliefs, they could then work toward exploring the strongest presentations of the greatest diversity of reasonable views possible (including disagreements about what counts as reasonable). As philosophically disciplined exercises, then, they could proceed into the political discussion of how to respond to such robust diversity: the topic of philosophical pluralism. This work would be a credit to them. However, inasmuch as the prevailing MPE formats simply imply or only enumerate plurality and so overlook how the concept of pluralism applies to lived political life in educational practice, their philosophical value is severely diminished or even nil. If one purpose of philosophy of education in Western societies is to make explicit the terms and norms of the dominant culture and implicit social contract that many schools enact, then the MPE assignments amount to obstructing that aim. In this way, the MPE as a statement of beliefs, instead, arguably functions as a self-authored and socially constructed certificate of teacher candidates' suitability to teach within the status quo: a function that in past historical eras members of Christian clergies performed (Glegg, 1995, p. 19), and in some places still do. If teacher candidates are nervous about being 'too political' on their practicum or in the first years of employment post-graduation, this probable cultural reality in teacher education would only reinforce such a belief that the social contract in institutions must remain implicit. In metaphorical terms: Do not ask anyone in a school to roll back the political carpet and examine how the philosophical floorboards align beneath it. MPEs, often written as the expression of student learning throughout teacher education programs, reflect their socialization into dominant educational ideas of the day, while obscuring the fact that popular ideas come and go and limiting teachers' abilities to critically assess educational ideas in philosophical terms.

Acknowledgment

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