

Education

An Ontological Approach to Social Equity in Education

Thursday 2:15 pm; Panel 1

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Abstract: Although philosophy as a whole has made many important contributions to the field of education, the branch of ontology has relatively little to show. In this paper, I attempt to sketch some possible contributions of ontology—the study of what is fundamentally real—to education. Drawing primarily from theoretical and philosophical psychologist Brent Slife’s work on relationality, I begin by outlining two ontologies—abstractionism and relationality—as they relate to teachers’ contexts of teaching and students’ contexts of learning. Abstractionism assumes the primacy of teachers’ and students’ abilities, agency, actions, achievements and accountability in schools without regard to the real life contexts in which they are situated; i.e., abstracted from these contexts. Relationality, on the other hand, understands both teachers’ teaching and students’ learning in their larger contexts. In other words, abstractionism focuses solely on the classroom context while relationality situates what happens in the classroom in larger contexts such as socioeconomic context. In this way, relationality takes seriously the relations between all the factors that may play a part in educational processes. I then explore some of the other conceptual and educational implications of these two ontologies before explaining how these ontologies underlie educational policy-making and how they might inform educational policy debates; specifically, I compare the ontologies on how they approach socioeconomic conditions around education. I argue that ontology would provide a new framework and language for proponents of social equity in education that will help them communicate their positions more convincingly and that a relational ontology can be invoked to support arguments for social equity in education. I conclude by offering some cautions to educational leaders and policy-makers who might entertain this framework.