POETRY IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION: A BRIDGE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

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The educational climate in the United States today is often heavily compartmentalized. The work that goes on in primary and secondary classrooms all across the country often seems, in practice, isolated from the work of educational policymakers and the work of educational scholars and theorists. Within colleges of education, pre-service teachers often find themselves in the middle of what they perceive to be a "theoretical" or "philosophical" and "practical" divide.[1] Pre-service teachers may perceive themselves to be learning *about* the foundations or philosophy of education, but they are unlikely to view *themselves,* within their teacher roles, as authoritative philosophers of education. This perceived philosophical and practical divide alienates pre-service and in-service teachers from the philosophical foundations of their everyday classroom work.

This alienation is a problem because it may prevent practitioners from fully entering and contributing to all of the various discourses and conversations about education. Teachers should be connected to, not alienated from, the philosophical underpinnings of their work. Teachers who understand themselves to be philosophers of education, and who see their work as both practical *and* philosophical in nature, may be empowered with an additional foundational and theoretical "tool" to use both in joining educational conversations and challenging unhelpful educational discourse.

Creative writing, especially the literary form of poetry, is one overlooked and under-researched space where pre-service and in-service teachers can connect to the philosophical foundations of their work, unite the realms of theory and practice, and come to view themselves as philosophers of education with the authority to participate in and guide a diverse variety of educational conversations in their schools and communities. In this essay, I will argue that consistently and deeply reading poetry about education or written by other practitioners, which I will refer to as "teacher poetry," should be an important component of philosophy of education courses within pre-service

[1] Virginia Richardson, "The role of attitudes and beliefs in learning to teach," in *Handbook of Research in Teacher Education*, eds. J. Sikula, T. J. Buttery, & E. Guyton (New York: Macmillan, 1996): 102-119; Graham. P. McDonough, "Teaching Practitioners about Theory and Practice: A Proposal to Recover Aristotle in Teacher Education," *Journal of Thought* 47, no. 4 (2012): 7-22.; Oliver. McGarr, et. al., "Exploring the theory-practice gap in initial teacher education: moving beyond questions of relevance to issues of power and authority," *Journal of Education for Teaching* 43, no. 1 (2017): 48-60.

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teacher preparation programs, as teacher poetry has the potential to serve as a two-way connecting "bridge" between philosophy and practice.

TEACHERS AS KNOWERS, PHILOSOPHERS, AND POETS

Teachers possess a lot of knowledge. Some of their knowledge may come from formal pre-service studies in a teacher preparation program, where new teachers generally explore topics such as classroom management, child and adolescent development, motivation, and language acquisition.[2] Other knowledge is gained through professional development experiences, where in-service teachers may attend workshops on topics ranging from the best methods for teaching state standards to the appropriate ways to respond to a child with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In many of these educational spaces, pre-service and in-service teachers are presented with what is considered the accepted educational knowledge base: an organization of subject matter knowledge, theories, and teaching strategies and practices that has been codified using the standard methods, frameworks, and languages of university-based researchers. This conception of teacher knowledge as being "knowledge-for-practice" created and validated by university-based experts or educational policymakers reduces teachers to users of knowledge and has historically driven many of the most-widespread initiatives for teacher learning.[3] Some pre-service teachers have reported a belief that educational researchers are overall more knowledgeable about education than practitioners, suggesting that the prevalence of the knowledge-for-practice model has had real consequences on how new teachers view themselves as knowers.[4]

Aside from engaging with universities and other institutions, teachers also gain knowledge through their own teaching experiences. The experience of teaching itself, working with students, learning about and alongside them, and sharing time and space with them, leads to the development of practical knowledge, or "knowledge-in-practice."[5] This type of knowledge, the often deeply embodied and relational knowledge teachers gain from the act of teaching, however, is not necessarily recognized or valued by the dominant educational institutions unless and until they themselves have approved and

[2] Richard Neumann, "Social Foundations and Multicultural Education Course Requirements in Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States," *Educational Foundations* 24, no. 3 (2010): 3-17.
[3] Marilyn Cochran-Smith & Susan Lytle, "Relationships of Knowledge and Practice: Teacher Learning in Communities," *Review of Research in Education* 24 (1999): 249-305.
[4] Samuel Merk, & Tom Rosman, "Smart but Evil? Student-Teachers' Perception of Educational Researchers' Epistemic Trustworthiness," *AERA Open*, (July 2019).
[5] Anne M. Phelan,"A Fall from (Someone Else's) Certainty: Recovering Practical Wisdom in Teacher Education," *Canadian Journal of Education* 28, no. 3 (2005): 339–58.

codified it into the teacher knowledge-based for dissemination throughout the profession.

While the value of teachers' practical knowledge is increasingly being recognized within teacher preparation programs and school administrations, educational accountability measures, which are generally determined by policymakers at the state and federal levels, still impose a top-down organization onto teachers and confer great responsibility onto them without recognizing their distinct knowledge and authority as professionals.[6] This creates a situation in which, within schools, academic spaces — even those that deal specifically with issues of education — and the general public discourse, practicing teachers are often still not recognized as specialized, authoritative creators of meaningful knowledge.

Research suggests that teachers often view themselves, to some degree, as experts in terms of content matter and pedagogical and didactical skills.[7] In order for teachers to be even more empowered to participate in diverse conversations about education and challenge unhelpful policies, practices, and mindsets, however, teachers should also understand and experience themselves as authoritative philosophers of education. To be a "philosopher" denotes a specific relationship with knowledge and with oneself as a knower — a philosopher doesn't just passively know, but actively seeks truth and lives life in a place of seeking. A philosopher is a lover of wisdom, a wonderer, and a questioner.

While there has been some discourse about the relationship between philosophers and educators and whether or not they do or should interact with one another,[8] some scholars have suggested that teachers themselves, by virtue of the work they do in the classroom, *are* philosophers of education. Sam Rocha has noted, for example, that in John Dewey's democratic approach to philosophy, it is possible to see anyone with a philosophical disposition — that is, anyone who is "open-minded and sensitive to new perception, and who has concentration and responsibility in connecting them" — as a philosopher.[9] Rocha notes that, while a critic might claim that having a "philosophical disposition" does not equate to being a philosopher, in Dewey's view,

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[6] Richard Ingersoll, "Power, Accountability, and the Teacher Quality Problem," in *Assessing Teacher Quality: Understanding Teacher Effects on Instruction and Achievement*, ed. S. Kelly (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011): 97-109.
[7] Douwe Beijaard, et. al., "Teachers' perceptions of professional identity: An exploratory study from a personal knowledge perspective," *Teaching and teacher education* 16, no. 7 (2000): 749-764.
[8] Harvey Siegel, "On the Obligations of the Professional Philosopher of Education," *Journal of Thought* 18, no. 2, (1983): 31–37; Peter F. Carbone, Jr., "The Teacher as Philosopher," *The Educational Forum* 55, no. 4 (1991): 319-331; Morwenna Griffiths, "Why teachers and philosophers need each other: Philosophy and educational research," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 27, no. 2 (1997): 191.
[9] Quoted in Samuel D. Rocha, "Who Gets to Be a Philosopher? Dewey, Democracy & Philosophical Identity," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 66.

philosophy constitutes thinking that "has become conscious of itself" and has "generalized its place, function, and value in experience."[10] In other words, according to Dewey, philosophy is thought that bears a certain awareness, attitude, or disposition.[11] Rocha points out that it would be difficult to find anyone who does not carry this disposition and that it's not clear who could make that determination anyway, as "who can point to someone who goes through her life without the ordinary need to wonder, to be curious and open to new things?"[12]

If anyone expressing a philosophical disposition can be considered a philosopher, then it is clear that teachers, too, can be philosophers, and perhaps the work of teaching itself is what prompts practitioners to wonder, be curious, and open to new things. Engaging with poetry can encourage pre-service teachers to tune into their wonders, question what they previously assumed to be true, and begin building new knowledge about what it means to teach. Although "poetry" and "philosophy" are sometimes placed in opposition to one another, poetry can be an important jumping-off point into philosophical concepts and ideas and may serve as a bridge between what many pre-service teachers perceive to be the disparate worlds of philosophy and practice.

The so-called "ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry begins with Plato, who argued that poetry was mimetic, led its readers to focus on pieces rather than on wholes, misappropriated language, which was primarily the tool of the philosopher, and had the dangerous capacity to corrupt even the most balanced individuals.[13] Plato did not believe that poetry could make people wise, but he did allow for the possibility that it could point us in the direction of wisdom, and provide a starting point for philosophical inquiry.[14] The type of poetry that Plato wanted to allow in his ideal Republic was poetry that points beyond itself, that does not conceive of itself as a complete truth, but as an open question, a space for consideration and thought.[15]

The "ancient quarrel," it seems, has somewhat settled into a more peaceful state of co-existence, with poetry being perceived and defended by many scholars as philosophically useful. Following Plato's criticisms, Aristotle defended poetry, recognizing the ethical value that poetry can offer within its proper limitations, and noting that poetry isn't purely imitation, but also involves imaginative interpretation, and that poetry can reach toward universal truth.[16] Later philosophers such as Heidegger have further explored this relationship, arguing that poetry has the potential to "uncover" what philosophy can conceal.

[10] Rocha, "Who Gets to be a Philosopher?," 68
[11] Rocha, 68
[12] Rocha, 68
[13] Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[14] Barfield, *Ancient Quarrel,* 19
[15] Barfield, 24
[16] Barfield, 41

Although Heidegger asserts that, to a degree, all art is poetry, he also notes that "the linguistic work, the poem in the narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts."[17] As philosophers, Heidegger claims, we often lose sight of the nature of truth, focusing on our need to "get it right" instead of our potential to uncover and reveal the world and its being.[18] Philosophy, our attempt to understand and shape language, can't always lead to truth on its own because it really is language that shapes *us.* Therefore, "if we are going to move forward with a true philosophical response to the command, 'know thyself,' we will have to return to language, most purely spoken in poetry."[19]

Maxine Greene further explored the relationship between education and the arts, advocating for schooling that centers the arts as a critical component of the curriculum. Engaging with the arts, Greene argued, moves people towards critical awareness, a sense of moral agency, and a conscious engagement with the world — a sense of "wide awakeness."[20] In terms of poetry, Greene notes that, "what sinks below the surface, what is half-recalled, may be more likely to be recovered through engagement with a poem than through an inquiry into the facts."[21] Overall, the common ground between philosophy and poetry is rooted in the idea that "the exercise of both poetic and philosophical gifts constitutes a feeling after and a reaching for patterns, connections, meaning."[22]

Teacher preparation programs are often presented to pre-service teachers as being an "inquiry into the facts," a dive into best practices and evidence-based methods that have been "proven" to produce their desired results. Much of this curriculum arises from the pressure put on these programs at the state and federal levels to prove that they are producing high-quality teachers. Today, "teacher education institutions are being asked to deliver on an increasingly narrow set of objectives, or standards, with substantial amounts of time having to be spent on delivering that part of the curriculum that is being measured and reported."[23] As a result, teacher education often focuses on sets of skills and competencies that emphasize the importance of what teachers are *doing* rather than what they are *thinking*.[24]

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[17] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013): 71.
[18] Ben Rogers, "Poetic Uncovering in Heidegger," *Aporia* 12, no. 2 (2002): 1-7.; Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks,* ed. William McNeill (Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[19] Barfield, *Ancient Quarrel*, 253
[20] Maxine Greene, "Toward Wide-Awakeness: An Argument for the Arts and Humanities in Education," *Teachers College Record* 79, no. 1 (1977): 119-125.
[21] Maxine Greene, "The Poet, The City, and The Curriculum," (2008), Maxinegreene.org.
[22] Barfield, *Ancient Quarrel,* 41
[23] Tony Townsend, "Searching high and searching low, searching east and searching west: Looking for trust in teacher education," *Journal of Education for Teaching* 37 (2011): 497.
[24] M.A. Flores, "Teacher Education Curriculum," in *International handbook of teacher education*, eds. Loughran, J., & In Hamilton, M. L. 1 (2016): 194.

In such high-stakes environments, what pre-service teachers learn in the philosophy of education course can seem distant and disconnected from the lived world of the classroom. New teachers may enter the classroom viewing themselves as users of knowledge but not as philosophers or wonderers. Poetry has been recognized, specifically, as a way to "know" teaching, as "engagement with poetry can move scholars and practitioners closer towards integrating their intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic understandings of what it means to be a teacher."[25] In order to empower pre-service teachers to feel confident in joining a variety of professional conversations, including conversations surrounding the aims and foundations of education, teacher educators must be willing to explore new and meaningful pathways, such as poetry, to help pre-service teachers connect philosophy to the lived experiences of their practice.

EXAMPLES OF TEACHER POETRY

Poetry, as the linguistic work that Heidegger privileges, can fulfil an important pedagogical role within teacher education that traditional philosophical writing cannot always fulfil. In our daily lives, and often in our philosophical work, we view language as a tool of verbal exchange, agreement and disagreement, and, overall, communication with one another. Heidegger claims that language also names beings and brings them into the world. He calls this "projective saying," what occurs when we are pulled to respond to the world with our language, when we throw ourselves out into the open and engage with the beings we are calling into existence, and in which we prepare the sayable and bring the unsayable into being. According to Heidegger, poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is.[26] The philosophical texts we often read with pre-service teachers primarily use language to communicate ideas to the reader. Sometimes, however, perhaps what pre-service teachers who are growing as philosophers need the most is the space to uncover what is unsayable about the everyday work of teaching.

As both Heidegger and Greene suggest, poetry carries with it an important potential for uncovering, retrieving, and awakening to that which may otherwise have remained obscured or concealed. Many examples of "teacher poetry" — poetry written about the teaching experience, usually by practitioners themselves — combat the philosophical alienation teachers face and unite the theoretical and practical components of teaching by exploring the teaching experience as a holistic whole, with its philosophical and practical components intact and intertwined. Engaging with these richly complex and unified pictures of teaching is one way for pre-service teachers to dredge up and call to the surface their own wonders and curiosities and to begin developing an understanding of their everyday teaching work, roles, beings, and selves as responding to the

[25] Aaron Zimmerman, et. al., "Knowing Teaching Poetically," *LEARNing Landscapes* 12, no. 1 (2019): 203–315.
[26] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 71.

questions and problems they might encounter in their philosophy of education class.

As an example of teacher poetry, take the poem "A Rebel Song" published anonymously in a 1924 edition of *The English Journal*.[27] The author writes,

> The straight and ever narrow way,
> Paved with a well-wrought lesson plan,
> Points to a brilliant future day,
> When methods win and aims succeed.
> But oh! the joy to break our bonds
> And ramble in some winding path,
> Where eager youth at last responds
> And shy hopes brave a softened light.

Within teacher preparation programs, the definition of learning — something that is inherently measurable, something that can be delineated and planned before it happens — is generally assumed to be known and may not often be questioned. The speaker in this poem begins by considering a common understanding of learning that's accepted and prevalent: the vision of learning as "the straight and ever narrow way" that can be found through following a "well-wrought lesson plan" created in advance. The speaker challenges that understanding of learning, however, and instead expresses a longing to "ramble in some winding path," embracing the learning that arises through shared experiences with her students, where they at last will be inspired to respond and engage. The poem poses a question that we often put before pre-service teachers in philosophy of education classes — what *is* learning?

In exploring this question with pre-service teachers, we might turn to the Platonic idea of leaning as remembering: the process of re-discovering the knowledge that already rests inside of us. We might consider Locke's conception of the "blank slate:" humans as empty minds that are ready to be written upon by a person's environment. We might turn to the pragmatist's vision of learning as a social, experiential, and inevitable endeavor. For pre-service teachers, however, these ideas and their accompanying texts may seem to live purely in the realm of the theoretical, far away and disconnected from the actual goings-on of the primary or secondary classroom. Through the lens of a teacher's own classroom experiences and her lived and unspoken daily longings, the poem "A Rebel Song" uncovers some of the depth behind the everyday classroom challenge of wrangling the complexity of learning into our own schedules, our own spaces, on our own times. The poem bridges philosophy and practice by presenting a holistic picture of teaching in which the question *what is learning* has a real outcome, a real impact, on the experiences of the teacher and her students.

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[27] "A Rebel Song," *The English Journal* 13, no. 9 (1924): 674.

"Raising their Hands," a poem by Julia Lisella, complements "A Rebel Song" by elaborating on a similar theme of challenging common notions of learning.[28] In this poem, the speaker explores the dreams she has about her students and the way they insist upon raising their hands in her classroom. The speaker says, "Put your hands down, I tell them. / Shout. Explode. Scream it. / Instead they look at me and smile / the way they would at foreigners who don't speak the language. / That's how they've trained me." In this poem, the speaker discusses her discomfort with the patterns of schooling her and her students have become accustomed to and explores her yearning for something else: a more fluid classroom dynamic, less structured and perhaps more democratic learning, and a genuine conversation.

The poem remains ambiguous, however, regarding what the speaker actually does about her discomfort. In that ambiguity, it invites the readers into their wonder. Why do we assume that hand-raising must be a part of classroom activity? What could schooling look like if students *didn't* raise their hands? Why does schooling train us to understand learning in particular and narrow ways, and who benefits from that? This poem also viscerally uncovers the feelings of discomfort that can arise from our roles as teachers, the difficult-to-describe and somewhat isolating sense of being separated from our students behind the entrenched expectations of schooling, which can sometimes seem impassible. With its close first-person narration and the speaker's invitation into the world of her dreams, "Raising Their Hands" encourages readers to encounter and consider this discomfort and its origins in an intensely personal way that traditional philosophical writing may not be best suited for.

Another example of teacher poetry that does unifying work is Dante Di Stefano's poem "Prompts (For High School Teachers Who Write Poetry).[29] In this poem, Di Stefano writes, "Write about walking into the building / as a new teacher. Write yourself hopeful. / Write a row of empty desks. Write the face / of a student you've almost forgotten; / he's worn a Derek Jeter jersey all year."

The speaker reflects on teaching Othello to this student when he came to class early for help each October morning. Then, the speaker asks, "Write about reading his obituary five years after he graduated. Write / a poem containing the words 'common;' / 'core,' 'differentiate,' and 'overdose.'" The speaker ends the poem by inviting the reader to "Write how all this added up to a life."

The idea of considering how teaching "adds up to a life" recalls the discussion of the ethical life of the teacher and asks the reader to consider what teaching is *about,* what this profession asks of its practitioners, what practitioners receive in return, and, as Chris Higgins puts it, why the practice of teaching is

[28] Julia Lisella, "Raising Their Hands," in *Learning by Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about School,* eds. M. Anderson & D. Hassler (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999): 33.

[29] Dane Di Stefano, "Prompts (For High School Teachers Who Write Poetry)," (2019), Poets.org.

worth putting at the center of one's life.[30] Di Stefano guides the reader into this conversation through a nuanced depiction of his own classroom experiences, rich with details about his students Zuly and Nely, sisters from Guatemala still learning English, and all the other students who cursed him out and slammed his door and who screamed "you are not my father." This poem asks the reader to consider what a "life" entails, and what a life of teaching entails, inviting pre-service teachers into a richly ethical conversation by connecting it to a real teacher's lived reflections and ultimately presenting a unifying picture of the complexity of the profession.

Any of these poems could fit into the curriculum of a philosophy of education class, either as texts presented independently to introduce questions or problems and call pre-service teachers' wonder to the surface or paired with more traditional texts to provide an alternative way to explore philosophical ideas. Importantly, teacher poetry provides pre-service teachers with a starting space to jump into philosophical ideas and also to uncover what Greene termed, "what sinks below the surface," the joys and discomforts and fears about teaching that seem unsayable, but that can be reached through the flexible medium of poetic language. Through consistently integrating teacher poetry into philosophy of education classes, teacher educators can provide pre-service teachers with multiple pathways toward understanding complex ideas and can present them with pictures of teaching that are unified, with philosophical and practical problems inextricably intertwined. This may lead to pre-service teachers beginning to develop a sense of themselves in their teacher roles not just as users of knowledge but as philosophers of education.

CONCLUSIONS

Heidegger's interest in "unconcealing" rather than just finding a single correct or most true answer aligns with many of the goals teacher educators often have for pre-service teachers studying the philosophy of education. We generally do not aim to indoctrinate our students into any one particular school of thought. We don't aim to teach them that to be good teachers, they must only follow the educational approaches of A.S. Neill or Maria Montessori.[31] Instead, we want them to think flexibly, critically, and responsively. We want them to reflect on their biases and their relationship to the world they live in. We want them to develop a wonder-ful and curious disposition toward themselves, their world, and the work of teaching. Just as Heidegger suggests that there is not only one singular pathway towards truth, we want our pre-service teachers to understand that teaching itself is an open question, a never-ending conversation. We want to empower them to feel confident in participating fully in that conversation, including discussions about the foundations and aims of education.

[30] Chris Higgins, *The good life of teaching: An ethics of professional practice* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011): 9.
[31] Colin Bakker, et. al., "The Inadequacies of Assigning 'My Philosophy of Education' Statements in Teacher Education Courses," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 26 (2020): 14.

If these are truly our goals, then we should provide pre-service teachers with many different ways of thinking about education and seeking truths about teaching. While philosophy of education and teaching practice are not really things that can be separated, they are often presented to pre-service teachers as two totally different realms. Traditional philosophical texts encourage readers to seek truth by engaging in thought that is clear, critical, and consistent, but that some pre-service teachers may struggle to connect to their lived experiences. Teacher poetry serves as a two-way connecting bridge, an overlapping middle ground between philosophy and practice, because it also aims to uncover truth about teaching, but does so through applying the uniquely world-building power of flexible, poetic language directly to the lived experiences of teachers in the classroom.

In the high-stakes educational environment pre-service teachers enter today, teacher educators should be willing to explore different avenues to help pre-service teachers grow into their identity as authoritative knowers, wonderers, and philosophers of education. We should expand beyond traditional philosophical texts and consider new ways to engage pre-service teachers in exploring the problems and questions in philosophy of education. In this essay, I have argued that the literary form of poetry is a philosophically useful tool to "bridge" the perceived gap between philosophy of education and educational practice. Teachers who perceive themselves to be philosophers of education may be more comfortable pushing back, from a theoretical standpoint, against unhelpful or harmful educational practices, and may be more confident in participating in all facets of the vast and continuing conversation that is teaching.