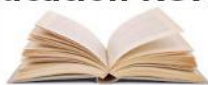


Education Review

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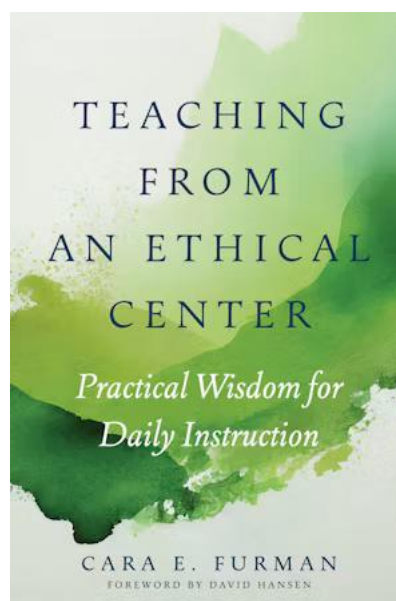
Furman, C. E. (2024). *Teaching from an ethical center: Practical wisdom for daily instruction.* Harvard Education Press.

290 pp.

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I was too intimidated in college to take a philosophy course. At the same time, I have always been drawn to philosophical ideas and find them useful and illuminating in my own work as a scholar. As a result, I often read philosophy, although always with slight trepidation. Cara Furman's book gave me several insights into how to read philosophy: slowly, reflectively, carefully, and trusting myself as a reader and thinker. She also gave me inspiration and wonderful insight into my writing about education and my own teaching.



In this highly readable book about teaching and ethics, Furman strikes the perfect balance: she weaves philosophical ideas together with examples of teaching practices so that philosophy illuminates the teaching practices, giving them both a new depth. She makes ideas from philosophy concrete and alive while she makes educational ideas and practices complex and compelling. Rather than an abstract treatise about philosophical concepts, *Teaching from an Ethical Center* is a practical book for teacher educators, teachers, and philosophers of education that draws on the structures of Furman's courses and brings the reader into the lovely worlds that Furman, as a talented educator, has created and continues to create in her university, early childhood, and elementary classrooms. As an educator, one of her goals is to help teachers learn to articulate their goals for teaching. She does exactly that for us as readers.

Furman defines practical wisdom as a blending of philosophy and practice. Her focus in this book, as in her previous book and several of her articles, is on human dignity through stories and practices that promote and affirm dignity. At a time when human dignity has been challenged in classrooms and in the world

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at large, this is exactly the book we need. Children, and their inherent dignity, are at the center of Furman's classrooms and the heart of this book. She makes a convincing claim that all educational acts are based on values. Through braiding the words of philosophers and educators, together with her own powerful insights and concrete activities, she guides us as readers and educators to apply the ideas to our own practice. Furman has written a book that is both useful and inspiring to a wide range of current and future educators.

Today, most teachers are instructed to implement so-called "best practices," which are often embedded in mandated, prescriptive, and, too often, scripted curricula. Teachers are told to implement the curricula with fidelity and given little room for improvisation or decision-making. Importantly, curricular decisions by districts and administrators remove opportunities for teachers to use their own knowledge of children and teaching and of their local contexts to determine how and what to teach. Furman rejects this way of preparing new teachers or supporting experienced teachers. Rather than promoting packaged curriculum or offering solutions to the myriad of teaching dilemmas that teachers encounter on a daily basis, Furman asks teachers to identify their "ethical compass," derived from their values, in order to guide their teaching. She explains that finding one's ethical center helps a teacher to make daily ethical decisions and gives them the ability to shift gears and find a way forward even in difficult times. In other words, she trusts teachers and provides them with tools to trust themselves.

Furman forcefully argues for teachers, including student teachers, to hold firmly to their commitments and beliefs about children, teaching and learning, and schooling. She offers examples of how to do this work by taking a philosophical stance, grounding themselves, and finding the cracks or places from which to teach from an ethical and moral stance.

For instance, Furman describes in great detail the reading program in her first-grade classroom. Today, as Furman explains, it would be close to impossible to implement what she calls the "workshop model" or a system of allowing students to select their own books, and participate in direct skill instruction, listen to read-alouds, and more. As she explains, "The general premise of this model is that students learn by doing and then reflecting," based on the Deweyan philosophy that children learn to read by reading (p. 207). She describes how she adapted this pedagogical method to her own values and beliefs about learning, defending her beliefs about assessment, and modifying her practices. This all changed when her school was closed in response to COVID and she had to determine how to stay connected with her students and discern what was most important. The pandemic and other events in Furman's teaching career helped her to make a firm commitment to stay grounded in her beliefs. Helpfully, Furman ends her chapter with activities to help her readers stay true to their own ethical commitments.

In this book, Furman simultaneously highlights philosophical ideas, work with prospective teachers, and classroom practices. Her chapter on the close reading of fairy tales with her first and second graders, "No, David! Hermeneutics" is a wonderful example of blending these approaches. (*No, David!*

is a well-known children's book by David Shannon.) She introduces the oral inquiry practice, *A Descriptive Review of Work*, developed by Patricia Carini, Beth Alberty, and colleagues at the Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research. She explains in detail how she introduced this process, which is designed to deeply and collectively study images or short texts, to her class of prospective teachers. After studying a range of images, she asked her students to describe images and text from children's books.

Furman ties together the chapter, which is filled with activities for an elementary classroom as well as a university teacher education classroom, with insights from philosophers such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Hans-George Gadamer, once again bringing depth and new meanings to our understanding of teaching practice. She concludes with an example of a teacher who revised the mandated curriculum through a close reading of that curriculum alongside the determination of the needs of her students. The teacher used her knowledge of close reading, as well as her knowledge of the children in her rural classroom, to create an opportunity for her rural students to understand the meaning of crossing a city street, information that is essential for students to make sense of the book, *Make Way for Ducklings*. This example vividly illustrates the meaning of close reading in a new, yet important context. It also gives Furman the opportunity to urge teachers to make their own ethically informed decisions and stay true to themselves.

In sum, Furman writes powerfully about the importance of blending education and philosophy, introducing teachers at all levels to how to take a philosophical stance in their teaching rather than only providing them with opportunities to read philosophers. She provides compelling examples of teachers, including many of her former students, who talk about their practice "along philosophical lines" as well as numerous examples of her own practice. She proposes a new form of hybridized dialogue that brings together both philosophical and educational discourses and in doing so provides a blueprint for educators to weave philosophical ideas into their practice. Rather than an additional subject to teach, Furman argues convincingly that philosophy can and should be an integral part of all teaching.

I look forward to trying many of these ideas in my own university classroom, exploring what it means to infuse philosophy into teacher education. I also anticipate that my education philosophy colleagues will have similar opportunities to bring concrete educational ideas into their philosophy classrooms. Furman writes that she read philosophy on her subway ride to the elementary school where she worked. She urges us to do the same.

About the Reviewer

Katherine Schultz is a professor at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education and a faculty affiliate in Renee Crown Wellness Institute. She was Dean of the School of Education from 2017-2023 following her appointment as Dean of the School of Education at Mills College in Oakland, California, from

2010-2016. She served as professor and director of the teacher education program at the University of Pennsylvania from 1997-2010. During that time, she was the faculty director of the Philadelphia Writing Project and served on the Empowerment Board (School Board) of the Chester Upland School District. Her scholarly work has focused on the research, development, and dissemination of practices that support new and veteran teachers working with marginalized populations in high poverty areas. Her two books, *Listening: A Framework for Teaching across Differences* and *Rethinking Classroom Participation: Listening to Silent Voices* address these issues. Her most recent book, *Distrust and Educational Change: Overcoming Barriers to Just and Lasting Reform*, about the role of distrust in educational reform, draws on her work in Oakland, as a school board member in Chester, PA, and leader of professional development in international settings. She has three books in preparation or in press: *Practice: Keywords in Teacher Education*, with Rachel Throop; *Leading on the EDJE: A Framework for Advancing Justice in Schools of Education*, with Kevin Kumashiro (co-editors); and *The Dignity of Teachers and Teaching*.



About the Author



Cara Elizabeth Furman is an associate professor of early childhood education at Hunter College and former urban public elementary school teacher. She is the author of *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice: Cultivating Practical Wisdom to Create Democratic Schools* (with Cecelia Traugh). She writes about descriptive inquiry, inquiry, asset-based inclusive teaching, and progressive literacy practices. She holds a BA in history, Haverford College, an MA in elementary education and a PhD in philosophy and education, both from Teachers College, Columbia University.

Her scholarly works focus on teacher development, inquiry, asset-based inclusive teaching, and progressive literacy practices. She integrates qualitative and philosophical research methodologies in the study of teacher decision making and ethics.

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