Methods in Philosophy of Education

Edited by Frieda Heyting, Dieter Lenzen and John White

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This book introduces a variety of methodological approaches in philosophy of education. Established researchers from various philosophical and national backgrounds demonstrate the application of their methodologies by examining issues concerning children's rights and education.

The diverse methods reflect current debates in philosophy of education and demonstrate some of the specific contributions to educational sciences which can be expected from the subject. The methods examined include: analytic philosophy, reflective equilibrium, structuralism, deconstructionism, hermeneutics and antifoundationalism.

The demonstrations of methodological approaches will be of great interest to both new and experienced researchers in the field, and readers interested in children's rights in education will find fresh light thrown upon a number of topical issues.

Frieda Heyting is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and History of Education at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her main fields of interest and publication are social philosophy of education and epistemological questions in philosophy of education.

Dieter Lenzen is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Institut für Allgemeine Pädagogik (Institute for General Theory of Education), Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. His many publications are in the fields of theory of education and *'Bildung'*, historical anthropology of education, system theory and radical constructivism and pedagogy, empirical school research and educational scientific media reception research.

John White is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, where he has worked since 1965. His interests are in interrelationships among educational aims and applications to school curricula, especially in the areas of the arts, history, and personal and social education.

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Contributors

Gert Biesta is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education of the University of Exeter, UK, and editor-in-chief of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*. His main research interest is in educational theory and philosophy. Over the past years, he has published on questions about education and communication, both on the micro-level of the relationship between education and the wider socio-political context. He takes his main inspiration from pragmatism (Dewey, Mead) and post-structuralism (Foucault, Derrida). He recently co-edited *Derrida & Education* (with Denise Egéa-Kuehne, 2001) and co-authored *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (with Nicholas C. Burbules, 2001).

Yvonne Ehrenspeck is Lecturer of Philosophy of Education at the Institut für Allgemeine Pädagogik (Institute for General Theory of Education), Freie Universität Berlin. Her main fields of interest are: aesthetics and education; education and media; and philosophy of (educational) science. She has published many articles and book chapters; one recent book is *Versprechungen des Ästhetischen: die Entstehung eines modernen Bildungsprojekts* (1997).

Frieda Heyting is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and History of Education at the Institute of Education, Universiteit van Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She is editor-in-chief of the Dutch educational journal *Pedagogiek* and co-editor in chief of the German *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*. She co-edited *Pädgogik und Pluralismus* (with H. E. Tenorth, 1994) and *Educational Studies in Europe* (with J. Koppen, D. Lenzen and F. Thiel, 1997)). Her interests and publications are in the fields of social philosophy of education and epistemological questions in philosophy of education.

Alfred Langewand is Professor of General and Historical Pedagogy at the University of Flensburg, Germany. His publications mainly concern philosophy of education and ethics, theory of instruction, and the philosophical and historical aspects of German idealistic philosophy and pedagogy, especially Rousseau, Kant, Fichte, Herbart and Schleiermacher. Methodology of historical research is also a field of interest. Among his

publications are *Moralische Verbindlichkeit oder Erziehung: Herbarts frühe Subjektivitätskritik und die Entstehung des ethisch-edukativen Dilemmas* (1991); he recently co-edited *Lokale Wissenschaftskulturen in der Erziehungswissenschaft* (with A. von Prondczynsky, 1999).

Dieter Lenzen is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Institut für Allgemeine Pädagogik (Institute for General Theory of Education), Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. He is First Vice-president of the Freie Universität Berlin and editor-in-chief of the *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*. His many publications are in the fields of: theory of education and '*Bildung*'; historical anthropology of education; system theory and radical constructivism and pedagogy; empirical school research; educational scientific media reception research. A recent book on methodological issues is *Handlung und Reflexion. Vom pädagogischen Theoriedefizit zur reflexiven Erziehungswissenschaft* (1996).

Wilna Meijer is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy of Education at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Research interests include testing and showing the viability of classical educational concepts for reflecting actual educational issues, such as: environmental education; literacy and literary education in a modern media context; religious education and humanities education in the present Western European multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. Her books include *Stromingen in de pedagogiek* (1999, 3rd edn) and *Perspectieven op mens en opvoeding* (2000, 6th edn).

Jörg Ruhloff is Professor and Chair of the Institute of Philosophy and History of Education at the University of Wuppertal, Germany. His main field of research is the transcendental and sceptical philosophy of education and its traditions (ancient world, Renaissance and Enlightenment. Recently he published *Skepsis und Widerstreit. Neue Beiträge zur skeptisch-transzendentalkritischen Pädagogik* (with W. Fischer, 1993) and co-edited *Deutsche Gegenwartspädagogik II, III* (with M. Borrelli, 1996, 1998).

Ger Snik is Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Philosophy and History of Education, University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He has published many articles and chapters in books about the relation between education and becoming a person, freedom of education, and liberal and communitarian views in educational thinking. He has also co-edited a book on critical thinking, *Kritisch denken als opvoedingsdoel* (with A. W. van Haaften, 1995).

Ben Spiecker is Professor of Philosophy and History of Education at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His research interests lie in the areas of moral, civic and sexual education. His many publications include *Philosophical Issues in Moral Education and Development* (edited with Roger Straughan, 1988) and *Freedom and Indoctrination in Education* (edited with Roger Straughan, 1991).

Jan Steutel is Reader in Philosophy of Education at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He is a member of the Board of the *Journal of Moral Education*. His many publications and work in progress focus on moral and civic education, in particular on the virtue approach to moral education. Recently he edited (with David Carr) *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education* (1999).

Wouter van Haaften is Professor and Chair of the Institute of Philosophy and History of Education at the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He is also Chair of the Dutch graduate school in Philosophy and History of Education. He has written books and many articles on topics on the philosophy of education, philosophy and logic of development, philosophy of language, on moral development, and relativism. He recently co-edited *Philosophy of Development: Reconstructing the Foundations of Human Development and Education* (with M. Korthals and Th. Wren, 1997), *The University and the Knowledge Society* (with P. Baggen and A. Tellings, 1998), and *Moral Sensibilities and Education*, vol. I, *The Preschool Child*, vol. II, *The Schoolchild* (with Th. Wren and A. Tellings, 1999, 2000).

John White is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of London Institute of Education, UK, where he has worked since 1965. His interests are in interrelationships among educational aims and applications to school curricula, especially in the areas of the arts, history, and personal and social education. Recent books include *Education and the End of Work: A New Philosophy of Work and Learning* (1997), *Do Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Add Up?* (1998) and *Will the New National Curriculum Live Up to its Aims* (with Steve Bramall, 2000).

Patricia White is Research Fellow in Philosophy of Education at the University of London, Institute of Education, UK. Her recent publications include *Civic Virtues and Public Schooling: Educating Citizens for a Democratic Society* (1996) and a four volume international collection of work in philosophy of education, *Philosophy of Education: Themes in the Analytic Tradition*, (1998) co-edited with Paul Hirst. She has written many papers on ethical and political aspects of philosophy of education.

Colin Wringe is a Reader in Education at the University of Keele, UK, and is currently Treasurer of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. He has published widely in various areas of philosophy of education. His books include *Children's Rights: A Philosophical Study* (1985), *Democracy, Schooling and Political Education* (1984) and *Understanding Educational Aims* (1988). Recently, he has written a number of articles on moral education and citizenship education.

Preface

In the fall of 1998, the Dutch graduate school for philosophy and history of education (the *Kohnstamm-netwerk*) organised an international symposium in Amsterdam in order to discuss current methodological issues in philosophy of education. The result was remarkable in several respects. Methodological debates resulting from delivered papers showed liveliness that participants had hardly experienced since critical theory disturbed the peace of 'positivist' methodology in the 1970s. Despite the relative silence in the past decades, papers and discussions gave evidence of substantial renewal and progress in the field. However, at the same time, debates as well as very lucid commentaries from participating PhD students made clear that methodological views in philosophy of education still had to be crystallised in some respects – even though philosophers of education remain reluctant to commit themselves to fixed methodological rules for good reason, as this volume demonstrates. A project to publish a book on methods in philosophy of education seemed a good way forward.

Publication of such a book would also serve a second end. Participants were impressed with the profusion of views and insights that philosophers of education from different linguistic backgrounds – especially English and German traditions – mutually had to offer. Despite the growing international character of the discipline, methodological approaches appear to draw on different sources that have by no means run dry. The project could thus give this mutual learning process a new impulse. The combination of editors – from Berlin, London and Amsterdam – reflects this dimension of the project. Contributors were selected to ensure a wide variety of approaches.

In deciding to prepare a book on methods in philosophy of education, we also bore in mind the opportunity to facilitate the training of new researchers in the field. The above-mentioned inclination of philosophers of education to keep their methodological options open excludes any exclusively 'technical' kind of training and demands a specific blend of reflection and practice. Contributors not only describe and justify a certain approach, but also demonstrate its methods of working – thus giving rise to reflection as well as exercise.

These three ingredients – to revive methodological discourse and reflection, to make resources mutually available on an international level, and to support newcomers to the field – provided the formula for this book. Now that it's finished, we look back on a period of inspiring and fruitful cooperation, not only with contributing authors, but also with a wider circle of colleagues. Those PhD students who commented on first drafts should be especially mentioned here. We thank the Dutch *Kohnstamm-netwerk* for providing the project with the necessary funds.

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Frieda Heyting
Dieter Lenzen
John White

1 Methodological traditions in philosophy of education

Introduction

Frieda Heyting

Philosophical methods: to ascertain truth and to answer questions

How do you *do* – or how should one do – philosophy of education, and why should one do it that way? This question served as a guideline for an international project in philosophy of education. However, as it soon turned out, debates would not result in an unequivocal answer to the question raised. Unlike John Wilkinson, participants in the project would not be able to provide their students with 'an infallible recipe to make a great (…) Philosopher of a numbskull' (Wilkinson 1969: 153).

Debates rather confirmed the view that philosophy of education could never be reduced to a technical know-how. However, the absence of a univocal answer to the question about methods in philosophy of education does not indicate that there are no answers at all. In fact – as the symposium confirmed once again – the history of philosophy demonstrates an uninterrupted concern for methodical issues, resulting in a lot of judicious answers to the question 'how to do' philosophy. However, as the acute commentaries from the attending students demonstrated, each of these answers keeps being open to question in certain respects. Against this background, a book on current methodological insights in philosophy of education seemed necessary.

Two major sources from which debates on philosophical methods seem to stem match the two main functions methods should serve. Firstly, a methodical approach should ascertain verifiable truth of the results of its application. Because philosophers – unlike empirical researchers – are not inclined to simply adopt a specific view of what 'true knowledge' entails, they tend to relate methodological considerations to fundamental epistemological questions. Therefore, differing opinions on methodological issues, and consequently a plurality of methods, seem to be unavoidable.

Secondly, a methodical approach should ascertain verifiable answers to specific questions. Which questions should be answered by philosophy of education is not an established matter either. Philosophers of education, being so closely related to a social practice, can hardly ignore this issue. A

broad and historically persisting distinction could be made between approaches aiming at knowledge of an objective world, and approaches aiming at knowledge of a humanly perceived and experienced world. As can be expected, all kinds of mixtures can occur. Furthermore, these considerations as regards content are interrelated to the above-mentioned epistemological ones. Consequently, authors were asked to apply their methodological insights to a self-defined issue concerning children's rights.

From those complex backgrounds, a variety of traditions in philosophy of education arise. In this variety, certain national characteristics cannot be denied, simply because philosophers from different countries draw from different philosophical and scientific sources. At the same time, however, these various approaches share the main issues, not only in the above-mentioned formal sense, but also in a historical sense. Methodological debates seem to get intensified during specific historical periods. One such period followed the development and subsequent successes of the natural sciences.

Today, philosophers seem to live through a period of intense discussions as well, this time stemming from fundamental doubts on the relations between scientific knowledge and reality. The accompanying methodological concerns in philosophy of education seem to be activated by a growing – and liberally appreciated – pluralism in modern Western societies as well. This 'globalisation' of problems to be dealt with supports converging tendencies of different traditions. Of course, intensifying international exchanges also reinforce this process. The chapters that were brought together in this book not only illustrate the – partly nationally coloured – diversity and interplay of considerations concerning epistemology and content, but their recent convergence as well.

An irreducible plurality

Attention to methods of philosophical inquiry goes back to the ancient philosophers. For instance, Plato developed his dialectical method in various ways in the course of his writings (cf. Matthews 1972). In his turn, Plato developed those views partly in reaction to the methodological considerations of the sophists. At the end of the classical period, the sceptic Sextus Empiricus brought to perfection the sceptical method of setting up oppositions – suspending judgement as long as opposing statements of equal strength can be found (cf. Heyting and Mulder 1999). These few examples already demonstrate a diversity of philosophical method. In the course of history, this diversity would only increase.

The seventeenth century was a period of special importance to philosophical-methodological deliberation, partly due to the rise of the natural sciences and partly in reaction to the 'sceptical crisis' in philosophy that had followed the translation of the works of Sextus Empiricus (Popkin 1979). René Descartes (1596–1650) 'raised in this context, "outdoubted"

his contemporaries in order to find a truth so certain that all of the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics could not shake it' (Popkin 1980: 11). He wanted to demonstrate that ascertaining indubitable foundations, from which the body of true knowledge could be further developed, would be within reach. He published his *Discours de la Méthode* (1637), the second part of which was written according to his four self-set methodological rules, stating principles like 'accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so' and 'divide each of the difficulties which I examined into as many parts as possible' (Williams 1978: 32). Considering these rules hardly conclusive, Leibniz compared them with 'the precepts of some chemist; take what you need and do what you should, and you will get what you want' (Williams 1978: 32). However, Descartes had not intended such mechanical recipes, wanting merely 'to show in what way I have tried to conduct my own (reason)' (Williams 1978: 32). In Descartes's methodological rules skill on the one hand, and justified certainty on the other, competed for priority.

This same quest for absolute certainty made David Hume (1711–1776) appeal to the natural sciences that had become so extremely successful in the eighteenth century. According to MacNabb (1967: 75), 'Hume's policy, both in the *Treatise* (1739) and in the *Enquiries* (1748–51), was to apply the Newtonian experimental method to the British empiricists' investigations into the powers and principles of the human mind'. Hume strictly held on to his principles, that all ideas are derived from impressions of the senses, and that all matters of fact are to be proved by inference from experience (MacNabb 1967: 76). However, this approach forced Hume to give up so many philosophical ideas passed down through the ages that his pursuit could only end in scepticism, instead of true justified belief. His methodological rigorousness left him paralysed with respect to content, precisely the kind of situation Descartes had tried to avoid, though in his turn evoking much criticism from the profession.

These historical examples demonstrate two characteristics of methodological debates in philosophy. Firstly, they are preoccupied with fighting fundamental doubt, while at the same time evoking this very doubt. Secondly, it seems impossible for philosophers to agree on methodological questions even for a short time. A worldwide and enduring mainstream view in matters of philosophical method is not in sight. As the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) suggests, both characteristics are interrelated.

Wittgenstein was interested in finding a philosophical method that could guarantee justified and certain truth. For example, George Edward Moore (1873–1958) recorded Wittgenstein's remark in one of his lectures, of having caused 'a "kink" in the "development of human thought"…that a "new method" had been discovered, as had happened when "chemistry was developed out of alchemy"; and that it was now possible for the first time that there should be "skillful philosophers", though of course there had in the past been "great philosophers"' (Moore 1959: 322). Unfortunately, as

Moore also reports, Wittgenstein never expounded this method, but some indications of what he had in mind can be found in his work.

Discussing linguistic analysis, Wittgenstein makes a sharp distinction between the clarity achieved by refining or even completing 'the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways', and the clarity he is aiming at, which is 'indeed *complete* clarity' (Wittgenstein 1968: 133; original emphasis). Though he thinks 'an improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, is perfectly possible' (Wittgenstein 1968: 132), this is not the ultimate goal he has in mind. In his view, ultimately 'the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that (…) gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. – Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of methods can be broken off. – Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem. There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies' (Wittgenstein 1968: 133; original emphasis).

According to Wittgenstein, solving a diversity of problems – corresponding with a diversity of methods – lies well within reach, but solving *the* problem of philosophy, finding absolute certainty, is still pending. This situation has not changed to date. Wittgenstein's distinction between methods for solving problems and methods for solving 'the' problem could also explain why agreement on methods seems so much easier in empirical sciences than in philosophy. Referring to psychology, Wittgenstein observes, that 'the existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by' (Wittgenstein 1968: 232). Experimental method undoubtedly solves a problem, or even a class of problems, but considering experimental method a method to solve the problem of establishing absolute truth is beside the point.

In other words: as long as you are solving *a* problem – which empirical research does – and as long as you take for granted a specific view of solving *the* problem of establishing truth – which mainstream empirical research also does – consensus within the profession seems largely reachable. However, philosophers of education – as philosophers in general – are much like Wittgenstein in that they cannot ignore the philosophical problem of truth and certainty in developing and judging methods for solving specific problems. The question, how to solve *the* problem of truth, constitutes their final horizon. Any method to solve a problem in philosophy raises the question of how, in which way and in what respect this method can be said to represent the way to solve *the* problem. Philosophy is always 'tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question', as Wittgenstein (1968: 133) states. Such a situation seems to rule out any long-lasting consensus.

As the preceding paragraphs suggest, a book on how to do philosophy of education is a book on methods in the plural. We decided to bring together in a book a range of methodological considerations as can be found in

contemporary European philosophy of education. By not only asking authors 'how do you *do* philosophy of education?', but also asking them why one should do philosophy of education that way, we hoped to gain insight into their ways of relating methods of solving 'a' problem to the overall background question of solving 'the' philosophical problem.

A diversity of approaches results, drawn from a wide variety of philosophical sources ranging from analytical philosophy – as is widespread in the Anglo-Saxon world – and interpretative approaches owing more to hermeneutic traditions from the European continent, to various postmodern lines of reasoning. Each approach generates its own instantiation of balancing claims of justification against ways of practising philosophy of education. As balancing justification and practice can be done in a theoretically infinite number of ways, this collection does not make any claim to completeness.

In view of completeness, we could have tried a categorisation, picking one representative from each approach. However, such an approach would easily evoke discussion on the quality of the categorisation instead of drawing attention to practising philosophy of education, which was our primary interest. From that perspective, the balancing of method and truth claims is only one of the problems – albeit a major one – philosophers of education encounter. A second dilemma of no less importance concerns balancing method against considerations as regards content, a dilemma to be covered in the next section.

Methodism versus particularism

Methods in philosophy of education should not only ascertain truth; they should be guidelines to answer specific questions concerning the subject of research. Producing 'true justified belief' – as knowledge is usually defined – requires a combination of both dimensions. As we saw, the first dimension – trying to attain true justified belief – will already cause enough trouble on its own. Considering those problems, Quine even goes so far as to suggest rejection of the very concept of knowledge. According to him, it seems hardly possible to satisfy both conditions – justification and truth – at the same time. One can have true belief on false grounds, and conversely 'the justification underlying a belief can be as reasonable and conclusive as you please and yet be contravened by some circumstances that nobody could reasonably have suspected' (Quine 1987: 108f.). Quine therefore urges one 'to accept the word "know" on a par with "big", as a matter of degree. It applies only to true beliefs, and only to pretty firm ones, but just how firm or certain they have to be is a question, like how big something has to be to qualify as big' (Quine 1987: 109). Consequently, it is a matter of *making a decision* as to what (kind of justification) we consider 'reasonable and conclusive'. This decision also depends on the question of knowledge *about what* one wants to achieve.

Consequently, questions of methods are stuck in the middle of considerations concerning justification on the one hand, and considerations concerning content on the other. Deciding on 'reasonable justification' also requires an idea of the results one is aiming for. In view of similar problems, Sosa (1986) distinguishes 'methodist' from 'particularist' approaches, the first being strongly inclined to consider justification of decisive importance, the second tending to give priority to content. Extreme methodism would eventually 'plunge us in a deep scepticism', depriving us of 'knowledge' on any subject, as Sosa demonstrates using the philosophy of Hume. One has to pay a price for such 'methodist' use of criteria. It would become impossible to prove any of the common-sense knowledge – let alone extend and refine any part of it – and thus create a big gap between philosophy and everyday problems. Particularism, on the other hand, would not resign itself to such a situation. 'If such criteria are incompatible with our enjoyment of the rich body of knowledge that we commonly take for granted, then as good particularists we hold on to the knowledge and reject the criteria' (Sosa 1986: 148). In practice, most philosophers can be situated between both extremes.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) made a close connection between methods in philosophy and the kind of problems at stake. In a way, he intended a supplement to the work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Assuming the truth of Newton's physics and contemporary mathematics, Kant had formulated the mental prerequisites of attaining this true knowledge. Dilthey adopted Kant's doctrine, that we can only know reality as the content of our consciousness. Consequently, both philosophers considered it the task of theory of knowledge to examine the knowing subject (cf. Rickman 1979: 52). However, Dilthey did not agree with Kant's approach, which had mainly focused on knowledge of nature. According to Dilthey, Kant's results could not be applied to knowledge of human reality. Considering them too one-sided cognitivist and unhistorical, Dilthey rejected Kant's a prioris as proper preconditions for the study of human phenomena.

According to Dilthey, Kant's 'knowing subject' could hardly be considered human. This brought him to his much-cited statement:

> *In den Adern des erkennenden Subjekts, das Locke, Hume und Kant konstruierten, rinnt nicht wirkliches Blut, sondern der verdünnte Saft von Vernunft als bloßer Denktätigkeit.* (In the veins of the knowing subject, as it was conceived by Locke, Hume, and Kant flows no real blood, but only the diluted juice of reason, by way of thinking activity.)
> (Dilthey 1973: xviii; cf. Rickman 1979).

According to Dilthey, the knowing subject was also to be provided with feelings and a will. In addition, considering it a metaphysical construction, Dilthey rejected Kant's idea of 'pure' reason, and replaced it by historical reason. The rules and principles of historical reason, as opposed to those of

pure reason, are variable with time and circumstances. Accordingly, Dilthey judges Kant's a priori fixed and dead (cf. Keulartz 1994).

Human life, as the historical totality of experience, thus has primacy over knowledge in all its forms. Where Dilthey makes a fundamental distinction between natural sciences and human sciences, he does so because of the fact that human beings relate differently to nature than to human phenomena, thus knowing both in a different way. As we have direct access to the historical human world, nature can only be observed from the outside. For Dilthey, this also results in a methodological difference between the two types of sciences: 'The natural sciences seek causal explanations of outer experience through hypothetical generalisations. The human sciences aim at an understanding (*Verstehen*) that articulates the typical structures of life given in experience' (Makkreel 1995: 203).

This primacy of life – and thus of practical interest – over knowledge makes interpretation not something that can be 'objectively' done, but something that people are involved in. Considering knowledge and interest interwoven reminds the reader in certain respects of John Dewey. The point is that practical interests condition interpretation (Gallagher 1992: 44). This methodical characteristic is common to all branches of hermeneutics, from Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1768–1834) original version relating discourse and understanding, Dilthey's concern about the proper method for the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) existential hermeneutics, to Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900–) more recent concerns for illuminating what is omitted by the specific character of written texts or culture in general, and Jürgen Habermas' concern for (un)distorted communication (cf. Gallagher 1992: 3f.).

These varieties of hermeneutics alone suffice to illustrate not only that methods can be considered dependent on the nature of the questions to be answered, but also that the way methods and questions are mutually related cannot be easily and unequivocally settled. Like epistemological considerations, the subject matter of philosophy of education and its expression in ways of doing research remains open to debate today. For this reason, authors were asked to apply their methodological views to a question of children's rights. This field seems interesting, not only because it currently evokes a reasonable amount of attention. It also allows for a broad variety of questions to be dealt with, leaving each author free to define his or her own specific interests, as related to methodological issues. On the other hand, the field seems just definite enough to make the chapters comparable as regards the specific mutual relations between methodological considerations and issues with respect to content.

Current topics as represented in this volume

Just as the rise of the natural sciences caused an intensified concern for methodological considerations in the seventeenth and eighteenth