

## **K-12 Education as a Hermeneutic, Adventurous Endeavor (Doron Yosef-Hassidim)**

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Review of

## *K–12 Education as a Hermeneutic, Adventurous Endeavor*

by Doron Yosef-Hassidim. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018

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### **Instrumentalism in K–12 Education**

Western nations are often observed to “educationalize” their social problems and state responses. Wealth inequality is framed in terms of human capital deficiency, and vocational education becomes the obvious solution. Poor health outcomes are attributed to lack of information, and health education programs ensue. By turning to education as a policy fix-all, Western societies invite a panoply of interests into education policy, curriculum development, and classroom experience. Thus, schools serve as sites of economic development in the eyes of businesses, ideological incubators for political parties, patriotic training grounds for nationalist actors, and catechetical hubs for religious communities. Some might view this phenomenon as ultimately democratic—schools can serve whatever purpose the populace desires. In *K–12 Education as a Hermeneutic, Adventurous Endeavor*, Doron Yosef-Hassidim offers a different analysis.

His work diagnoses our present state of affairs as an obstacle to education for its own sake. Schools and educators are held captive by various self-serving interests and prevented from realizing a truly humane education. His rather radical proposal—that the realm of education be given “sovereignty” over its own activity—offers the occasion to reexamine the aims and structure of modern mass schooling. The work reads as part cultural critique, part philosophical manifesto, and part policy recommendation. The author admits that his book might seem “utopian, too ambitious, too naïve, too romantic” (p. 229). Many readers will find it so, either for practical or theoretical reasons. Yet Yosef-Hassidim’s diagnosis of the late-modern instrumental approach to education is one of the boldest in recent memory. His vision for a different educational arrangement provokes both critical assessments and more thoughtful endorsements of current arrangements.

The book might be divided into three movements. The first, covering chapters 1 to 3, describes the rampant instrumentalism in contemporary schooling. A second trio of chapters proposes a new, non-instrumental vision based on open inquiry into the nature of human experience. Chapters 7 to 9 suggest how education might be freed from competing external interests. This review will briefly summarize each section before offering a historical reflection on Yosef-Hassidim’s vision.

## Instrumental Education

In chapters 1, 2, and 3, the author appeals to the work of Gert Biesta (2014, 2015), Padraig Hogan (2003), Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2013), Michael Oakeshott (1950/2004), and others to illuminate the instrumental ethos of modern education and calculate its human costs. Yosef-Hassidim's central argument is that education properly contains its own end. In the German academic tradition, the field of *Pädagogik* explores the growth of the child according to her own mysterious-yet-innate structure. This ideal, perhaps best reflected in Plato's Academy or Aristotle's Lyceum, has been betrayed by a long history of schools that are subordinate to non-educational ends. In brief, the primordial school, untouched by external influences, always serves as a liberating bulwark against the power of social elites. In medieval Europe, the school was "highjacked" by the Western Church and later handed over to a "secular master" during the political upheavals of the Reformation and early modern period (pp. 18–19). The result is an "instrumentalism" which the author is careful to distinguish from mere commodification. Yosef-Hassidim's connotation indicates "the sense of how others see public K–12 education as a means, a tool" (p. 21). Any aims which are exogenous to the ideal, self-referential vision of education qualify as instrumentalism. The instrumentalization of education means that students are not left to be themselves—they are increasingly valued for their potential to serve social interests. Their curriculum increasingly eschews deeper questions, especially those regarding "the meaning of being human" (p. 159).

## "Sovereign" Education

Exploring "the meaning of being human" serves as the groundwork for the non-instrumental education the work proposes in chapters 4, 5, and 6. As the title suggests, the ideal form of schooling (intentionally equated with "education") is both *adventurous* and *hermeneutic*. By jettisoning the influence of outside forces, the ideal education can take as its object the nature and dynamism of personhood. Thus "the total human phenomena, the total human experience, is the educational playground" (p. 104). Further, if given the freedom, educators and students can attempt to expand the horizon of the human experience—to push towards whatever might be "beyond" a typical understanding of human capacity. For Yosef-Hassidim, the "beyond" is not a nod to transhumanism, but rather a form of social critique. Students are allowed "to embark on adventures by imagining alternatives to the world they live in" (p. 105).

In order for education to truly be free from outside influence, the classroom structure must be free of didactic pedagogy. Proposing an answer to the question of "the meaning of being human" would constitute instrumentalism—educators would be using schools to advance their own ideologies and interests. So the classroom experience must be intensely conversational. It must be a place where "experiences, meanings, and understandings" (p. 125) are exchanged in an effort to construct personal meaning. Readers enamored with the liberal educational tradition may find much to admire in this model. However, by declining to propose particular ideas of the good, it may jettison the fruitful tension between deference to tradition and self-referential criticality that has been at the heart of Western debates over the nature of "liberal education" (Kimball, 1986). As a consequence, religious

schools, which propose a particular understanding of the world, are necessarily inimical to Yosef-Hassidim's vision (p. 47).

### Forging a Sovereign Education

How would this vision to come to fruition? The fourth chapter imagines a schooling arrangement in which education is “sovereign,” constituting its own sphere of human activity. How this arrangement might be achieved in the context of the modern liberal nation-state is the concern of the book's final chapters. The locus of external control of education currently seems to be politics: “[T]he authority over strategic policy making is located in the hands of politicians; many of the attempts to influence education are channeled through them and through the formal and informal political mechanisms they govern” (p. 176). The solution? Take politics out of education. Yosef-Hassidim admits that this sounds impossible. Yet there seems to be a rather straightforward fix. Many European nations (for example, Spain, Denmark, France, and Finland) have an institutional body, often termed a “National Education Board,” whose members are appointed by those within their profession and serve in an exclusively advisory capacity. A sovereign education would invest this body with executive power and divest the politically-appointed members of ministries of education. The author assures us that this alternative structure would not create “a closed club of ‘educationalists’” (p. 184), but would invite a larger range of civic groups into the educational conversation (albeit, ironically, in an advisory capacity). To charges that such an arrangement would ultimately be undemocratic, Yosef-Hassidim contends that true education cannot be submitted to the whims of political competition. “Put differently, a sovereign education based on the proposed conceptual framework prevails over an education that is democratic when ‘democratic’ means being controlled by the elected people in power” (p. 191). Just as enlightened citizens may relinquish their input regarding health practices to an autonomous government agency composed of expert medical professionals, so enlightened democrats will recognize education as its own unique sphere and entrust its care to a body of disinterested educators.

### Have We Had a “Sovereign” Education in the Past? Could We in the Future?

As the author admits, many readers will question whether this stylized “utopia” is possible or even desirable. In the opening of his second chapter, Yosef-Hassidim invites historians of education to explore the roots of the instrumentalization of K–12 schooling. I take up this invitation here, noting that historical reflection may also alert us to the promises and dangers of new proposals. For example, readers familiar with David Tyack's classic *The One Best System* (1970) will recognize calls to “take politics out of education” as the arguably disingenuous rhetorical device of early twentieth-century American progressives. Few in contemporary America would be unwary of such a suggestion. The following comments regarding the relevant historical roots of instrumentalism, particularly in the American context, will both critique the narrative of instrumentalism offered in the work and raise questions about the possibility of its proposals.

Most historians would be at a loss to identify a tradition of education unmoored from external interests, one separable from political, religious, economic, familial, or cultural concerns. Even Plato

and Aristotle were inheritors of the Ionian oratorical tradition and were eminently concerned with politics and education's place within the civic sphere. Further, it seems difficult for the medieval Church to have "hijacked" the school, as our modern Western understanding of "school" has its roots in the monastic *scola*. When we think of "schools," we imagine pupils at desks, often in rows, studying texts with a single master, who often stands while they sit; all of which are inescapably monastic inventions (Burke & Segall, 2011). Even the German *Pädagogik*, which Yosef-Hassidim contrasts with the Anglo-American interdisciplinary study of education, cannot be extricated from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German idealism and the more or less Hegelian Prussian state.

In the American context, historian Lawrence Cremin (1970) has observed that before the advent of the common school, families, villages, churches, and marketplaces formed a sort of "American *paideia*"; education was in fact constituted and generated by non-school cultural forces. The antebellum common school reform movement itself can only be understood in terms of what Yosef-Hassidim would call "instrumental" purposes. It was a social intervention devised by Whig elites to accomplish a number of economic, political, cultural, and religious aims. The schools were at once a custodial institution to contain the casualties of industrial capitalism, a civic training ground to inculcate republican virtue and patriotism, a preparation for factory work, and an avenue to assimilate newcomers to the English language and pan-Protestant religiosity (Kaestle, 1983). While revisionist historians might go too far in ascribing self-interested social engineering to Whig reformers, more sober assessments still highlight the fact that common schools grew only because citizens were able to use them for their own aims (Katz, 1968; Ravitch, 1978). Working-class rural Democrats were uncertain of social interventions in general, but saw tax-supported schools as a social-mobility ladder. Italian immigrants may have bristled at the thinly-veiled anti-Catholicism of the schools, but the promise of cultural acceptance, English training, and future factory work meant families frequently preferred the common schools to parochial schools (Lassonde, 2005).

This is all to say that at least in American (or perhaps even Western) history, there have never been pure, disinterested K–12 schools. Neither have there been politically and economically disinterested attendees. The schools cannot have been "hijacked" by non-educational interests because they were created by non-educational interests. However, I'd like to consider, alongside Yosef-Hassidim, whether sovereign education might be possible. In many respects, his vision of "education for education's sake" is rather appealing. The notion of school as a place to ask what it means to be human seems both noble and rather unobjectionable. The book identifies Wilhelm von Humboldt and Michael Oakeshott's definitions of intellectual leisure in the university as models of this sort of learning. We might add John Henry Newman's (1852/1982) and Josef Pieper's (1948/2009) visions as well. Can the protected space for humane contemplation that exists in Newman, von Humboldt, and Oakeshott's universities be transferred to national programs for K–12 schooling?

The project is not only ambitious, but under the author's scheme, I believe it is rather impossible. Even the models presented here are embedded in religious, cultural, and metaphysical concerns. Von Humboldt's University of Berlin, the hotbed of biblical criticism, proposed a particular anthropology grounded in liberal Protestant notions regarding the source of human goodness. Learning at Newman's Oxford was grounded in the dogmas of Christian Revelation. Even Oakeshott, who viewed university life as a great conversation of different ideas, is quoted as referring to contemplation of "being itself" (Oakeshott, 2004, p. 6)—an inescapably metaphysical suggestion. Ultimately, Yosef-Hassidim must appeal—through Gert Biesta (2011)—to Wilhelm Dilthey to argue for the existence of purely

“educational concerns” generated from within the experience of education itself. But Dilthey’s definition of the study of social phenomena as an “insider” interpretation of practice risks a certain solipsism. Only a rather blinded examination of one’s practice as an educator would overlook its economic, political, philosophical, or psychological origins and implications. I fear that the search for a purely “educational way of thinking” (p. 15) may prove futile.

As is the case with many utopias, the reader may be disappointed with the impossibility of the book’s proposals. However, this does not undermine the fruitfulness of the intellectual exercise. Yosef-Hassidim’s assessment of the instrumentality in modern mass schooling opens our eyes to its extent and its potential dangers. His proposals encourage us to widen our imagination and reexamine “the TINA creed: ‘there is no alternative,’ a perception that we live within arrangements that are self-evident and inevitable” (p. 55). We can certainly hope that *K–12 Education as a Hermeneutic, Adventurous Endeavor* will provoke either imaginative alternatives to our current arrangements or more reasoned defenses of them.

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