

K-12 education as a hermeneutic adventurous endeavor: Toward an educational way of thinking

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

K-12 education as a hermeneutic adventurous endeavor: Toward an educational way of thinking

by Doron Yosef-Hassidim

Routledge, 2019, 250 pages

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What is education? Is education a distinct discipline, with its own ways of thinking and researching? Is education anything other than a means to achieve non-educational ends or objectives?

At a pre-pandemic teachers strike, as I marched in solidarity beside many teachers in a Toronto February, I asked them why they were striking. Often their answers were about topics about which we shared progressive views: poverty, race, environmentalism. But their answers were about how education could be better used to achieve non-educational objectives. It seemed most of these teachers were not committed to education per se but rather the way education helped achieve other objectives they cared about more deeply. If there were another way to achieve those objectives, would teachers still want to work in education?

These same questions guide Doron Yosef-Hassidim's *K-12 Education as a hermeneutic adventurous endeavor*, a significant and substantial study of foundational educational principles. Yosef-Hassidim's aim is bold and broad: "In order for us—educators, both

practitioners and researchers—to talk meaningfully and effectively about the goals of K–12 education, we first need to have the ability to determine what K–12 education is” (p. 1).

Yosef-Hassidim outlines how education is instrumentalized, turned into a tool that is geared towards positive social, political, religious, economic, environmental impacts. But the question remains: is education just a way to achieve those objectives, a tool or an instrument for effecting change, or is it a distinct discipline and distinct practice that has its own inherent and distinctive value? We may agree or disagree with specific ends that education is directed to achieve, but the book asks whether education is anything other than an instrument for non-educational goals.

However, the aim of the book is not to promote disciplinary isolation or a purist view of education, but rather to note that something fundamental about education is lost and overlooked when it is construed as an instrument for achieving non-educational objectives. Yosef-Hassidim explains: “I show that a dominant view of K–12 education is an instrumental one and that this view or approach to K–12 education leaves it under attack and exploited by dominant social forces that wish to use it for their own interests” (p. x).

Yosef-Hassidim notes that this instrumental view is distinctively North American, where education is seen as an ‘object’ or ‘thing’ that is to be ‘used’, while Europeans often see education as a distinct academic discipline that generates its own original intellectual material. Yosef-Hassidim states that “...different from the Anglo-American sense of educational studies that takes education as an ‘object’ in that for Pädagogik education is less a phenomenon” (p. 8). The book therefore “calls for and offers preliminary ideas about developing an educational way of thinking” (p. 8).

Recent years have seen a growing literature investigating the distinctiveness of education (Biesta, 2014; Biesta et al. 2014). A symposium published in *Educational Theory* in 2008 investigated the “educationalization of society,” specifically “the trend toward thinking about education as the focal point for addressing or solving larger human problems” (Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008, p. 379). Yosef-Hassidim argues that, in response, educationalists should take a *protective* stance toward education, which “leaves education under attack by forces that wish to exploit it, and therefore I argue for a need to protect education. My vision for education will emerge from this call for protecting education” (pp. 1-2).

This book explores two fascinating and important questions: (1) is education a unique and distinct discipline and way of thinking; and (2) is education anything other than the achievement of non-educational aims or objectives? The first question is a

theoretical or conceptual question about education as a field of study, a way of thinking, a discipline of research. Yosef-Hassidim tries to get us to think about education not as something "...to be examined from outside, less something that is 'out there' to be learned and understood in a somewhat neutral manner using other foundational disciplines, and more a discipline that is based on a normative concern beyond intellectual motivation" (p. 9). In contrast, the second question is about education as a practice, an activity, a way of affecting the world in which education is seen as a tool or instrument.

The book is well organized: Chapters one through three start with the roots and history of instrumental approaches to education and catalogue their many current examples. Chapter three focuses on the negative consequences of this approach, and ways to protect education from these encroachments. Chapters four through six explore what Yosef-Hassidim calls "human centered guidelines" (p. 111) for education and, with links to John Dewey, emphasizes the role of meaning making in education. Chapter 7 explores "sovereign education" (p. 113) and even promotes new forms of governance that might limit political encroachments on education. Chapter 8 explores the implications of this in three areas: Teacher education, educational research, and interdisciplinary math education. The final chapter integrates previous arguments into strategies for articulating an alternative way of thinking of education, asking if we have ways to think educationally?

The book offers a powerful theoretical articulation of an often-overlooked educational concern that brings us to the 'heart' of education itself.

Yousef-Hassidim's arguments prompt us to reflect on the status of education as a field of academic study, and whether educational researchers are themselves contributing to the instrumentalization problem he exposes. Ideally, educational researchers should find the theoretical resources needed to conduct scholarly work within the field of educational research. Maintaining disciplinary fidelity doesn't necessitate disciplinary purity, or suggest that we mustn't read literature in other academic fields. Rather, perhaps we should ask ourselves: when doing our academic work are we turning to other fields, or to our own journals? That speaks to questions about commonality, community, communication, and the necessity for coherence within our own field. Do these journals help us to think educationally? The simple existence of those communicative venues such as conferences and journals does not necessarily or adequately answer the question.

Yosef-Hassidim explores the distinctiveness of education as both a way of thinking and a practical way of impacting the world, asking: what are the conditions that make

it possible for us to identify something as ‘educational’? He suggests that when we study education, we should be deliberately ‘educational’ about it. Too often when we study education with any other adjectival lens — political, economic, historical, and so on — we take away its autonomy, agency, distinctiveness, and value. If we believe education is an autonomous field — one offering an ability to set its own goals, and to be distinctive from what is outside of education— we must not obscure that distinctness.

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