

McGill Journal of Education
Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill



TASOS KAZEPIDES. *Education as Dialogue: Its prerequisites and its enemies*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. (2010). 207pp. CDN\$ 29.95. (ISBN: 978-0-7735-3806-1)

Marina Schwimmer

Volume 46, Number 1, Winter 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1005676ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005676ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

0024-9033 (print)

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Schwimmer, M. (2011). Review of [TASOS KAZEPIDES. *Education as Dialogue: Its prerequisites and its enemies*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. (2010). 207pp. CDN\$ 29.95. (ISBN: 978-0-7735-3806-1)]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 46(1), 171–175. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005676ar>

BOOK REVIEW

TASOS KAZEPIDES. *Education as Dialogue: Its prerequisites and its enemies*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. (2010). 207pp. CDN\$ 29.95. (ISBN: 978-0-7735-3806-1)

This book should be of interest to researchers, teachers as well as policy-makers for it offers a unique global approach to education that is extremely relevant to the challenges of the 21st century. Dialogue is presented not only as a teaching method but as an ideal conception of education, with its own foundations, principles, forms and preconditions, which are needed for the realization of genuine learning institutions. The book may sometimes seem utopian, but it allows us to hope, and hope rationally. The volume may also prove useful to those interested in questions pertaining to religious education in plural liberal societies. Kazepides strongly demonstrates the illegitimacy of doctrinarian religious education with regards to the ideal of an open society that privileges dialogue.

The concept of dialogue is very popular in contemporary academic discourses. Indeed, it is perceived and presented as the solution to the challenges of modernity, or, one could say, to the challenges associated with the disappearance of certainties. Because there no longer are any universal normative criteria to decide on ethical and political questions, we are invited to discuss these issues rationally in order to find consensus through intersubjective understanding (Habermas, 1984). Even though this approach to discourse ethics has itself been criticized for being utopian (Foucault, 1988), Kazepides offers a rather convincing analysis of the educational model necessary for the realization (always imperfect he admits) of the dialogical ideal. The book can thus be read as an analysis of the social, political and epistemological conditions needed for an education conceived as a practice of dialogue.

The book comprises 8 chapters and is divided in two parts. The first part is said to be “therapeutical” and lays the groundwork for the discussion of the second one. It clarifies the basic educational concepts that researchers, policy-makers and teachers too often use in vague and confusing ways. The second

part relies on these clarifications to identify and examine the prerequisites and principles of education and dialogue.

In the first chapter, Kazepides clearly places himself in the classic analytical tradition of philosophy. He stresses the importance of clarifying the concepts we use in order to address educational issues. He defines the nature of the philosophical problems as having to do with the concepts and arguments we use because language doesn't only describe the world, it participates in its construction. The next chapter gives the central and inescapable example of the concept of education.

In the second chapter, the author describes the origins of our concept of education and the criteria that distinguish what is properly educational from what is only of instrumental value. The concept of education can be deceptive and thus pernicious; it is often wrongly described merely as an activity with a beginning and an end or as a natural process that can be scientifically measured and controlled. In fact, education is more correctly conceived of as a human achievement and is thus intrinsically normative – the achievement of the rational ideal – and as an exercise of the mind through the many “language games” of the world. According to Kazepides, the educated person recognizes the demands of reason within each realm of discourse and is engaged in a conversation with the traditions of the past. The confusion surrounding the concept of education isn't solely a problem of language, asserts Kazepides, it reflects our own uncertainties about ourselves, our values and the world. It is because we need to give ourselves a sense of direction that we need theories of education.

In chapter 3, Kazepides makes other important clarifications about the “aims of education.” He states that it is inappropriate to talk about the aims of education, for only humans and institutions have aims. It would be more adequate to talk about the criteria and value of education. Talk about aims and objectives can be reductive. For example, the language of objectives is often used to refer to the work of teachers as if it were a set of applicable procedures, but this only reveals the fact that we are incapable of training good teachers who have wider views on their work. Another example is the perceived need for highly trained citizens in a competitive world. Viewing outcomes such as international competitiveness as educational objectives reduces education to a functional means to an end.

The second part of the book begins with a very important distinction between education and its prerequisites, which relies on Wittgenstein's conception of the foundation of knowledge. According to Wittgenstein (1953), there exist “river-bed propositions” which underlie our many language games. They are forms of ordinary certainties, the very ground that we inherit without having the possibility of rationally rejecting or justifying. These propositions comprise for example the law of induction or the belief in the existence of physical

objects. They do not result from our thought but are a condition to it. And they are crucial to Kazepides' argument for, epistemologically and morally, they have a developmental value. This distinction implies that different approaches and methods are required to deal with education on the one hand and its prerequisites on the other. It also reveals the importance of initiating individuals to the rational and moral forms of life as early as possible. It is a shame though that Kazepides does not develop further Wittgenstein's ideas on language games.

In chapter 5, Kazepides develops a social, dialogical approach of the development of the mind while criticizing computational approaches. Education is conceived as a form of free dialogue between the members of a society. The book contributes to the development of Michael Oakshott's ideas (1989) about education being an initiation in a conversation between oneself and past generations. However, Kazepides prefers the expression "dialogue" to "conversation" because it is immediately normative and inseparable from the demands of reason. What is interesting in this chapter is that it provides a non-instrumental approach to education and explicates the prerequisites, the principles, the character and the appropriate conditions of genuine dialogue. It is a valuable way of getting out of the usual discourse on efficiency in education. However, as is often the case with the defenders of dialogical approaches, Kazepides makes little of the fact that education is primarily addressed to the infant (*infans*), which means "who cannot speak for himself" in latin, and on whom we thus impose forms of language and rationality.

The distinction between education and socialization is also very important. Socialization, as a sociological concept, refers to the fact that human beings integrate the norms, beliefs and attitudes of the society they live in; these values could be Christian, humanistic or modern. If the school inevitably socializes, it must, nonetheless, assume its educational responsibilities, educate to the norms of rational dialogue. Consequently, it must not indoctrinate, which is the main counter-educative form of socialization. The distinction between the metaphorical and the radical approach to religious doctrine is probably one of the most stimulating arguments of the book. Kazepides does not reject once and for all religion or even religious education, he solely attacks the doctrinarian aspect of religious education. Doctrines are unverifiable but still prescriptive, whereas religious images are only models of action, which do not pretend to be rationally justifiable, they are "as if" they were true and their model can give direction to our lives. These images do not pretend to be true nor do they authorize themselves to be prescriptive. In that sense, they are not opposed to the dialogical ideal. Individuals remain free to question and think for themselves.

The dialogical ideal can never be fully attained because we, and our institutions, are not perfectly rational. However, Kazepides claims it is possible to favor the

ideal by transforming our social, political, economic and religious institutions. Of course, a lot of political will and long-term planning would be needed. Chapter 7, thus, denounces the enemies that violate the prerequisites of dialogue. Attention primarily goes to Christian doctrines, the way they pretend to have answers to the mystery of life, but actually inducing only cringing obedience. The prescribed antidote suggested by Kazepides is “sense of wonder” which reinforces questioning and doubt. Teachers, more than anyone else, should be infused by this sense of wonder because they serve as models.

The final chapter categorizes different statements on human nature in relation to what was said earlier about education and dialogue. Against the conceptions of a biologically or culturally “given” human nature, programmatic conceptions, or progressive conceptions, Kazepides, following Sartre or Oakeshott, states that there is no such thing as human nature. A man or woman is free to choose between various possibilities and, despite constraints, he or she is responsible for his or her becoming. The author then goes on to quote Oakeshott: “Human beings are what they understand themselves to be” (as cited in Kazepides, p.174). In this sense, education is not a given nor a political or religious program; it must be carefully planned as an end in itself that promotes human flourishing and rationality. Quoting Oakeshott again, he affirms the human “is a creature capable of learning to think, to understand and to enact himself in a world of human enactments and thus acquire a human character” (p.178). This makes him capable of participating in public life by means of dialogue.

No doubt, the book accounts for the relevance of Wittgenstein’s thought in the world of education. Following Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy as therapy, Kazepides presents a very rigorous and precise analysis that clarifies many educational concepts. The references to Wittgenstein’s work also offer a useful analysis of the role of river-bed beliefs for education. This allows us to explore the difficulties and the limits of dialogic ideal and to point out with clarity the foundations and prerequisites of its realization. Finally, the volume presents a genuine educational project that takes into consideration the many difficulties of the contemporary world. It has the merit of being very clear, so clear that one could criticize redundancy. Perhaps, the very traditional and somewhat narrow focus on dialogue and its rational prerequisites could lead one to ask whether it is not too restrictive. Some might blame a form of conservative modernism, but the recognition of non-rational elements, those beliefs that underlie and enrich human life, gives it balance. The book is thus a very important contribution to educational ideas and practice.

MARINA SCHWIMMER, *University of Montreal*

REFERENCES

- Foucault, M. (1988). The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom. In J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The final Foucault* (pp. 1-20). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action*, (volume 1). Translated by Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Oakeshott, M. (1989). *The voice of liberal learning*. (T. Fuller, Ed.), New Haven : Yale University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. New York: The Macmillan Compan.