

Educational Philosophy Meets Pedagogical Practice

Martin Laba

Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract

Authoritarian regimes keep their sights trained on educational institutions and curricula with the expectation that disfavoured and oppositional ideas and actions are fomented in the pedagogies and public spheres of higher learning. The rise of illiberalism and the current and expanding crisis of democracy are rooted in the erosion of education and educational governance where irrefutably, ideas have always been regarded as dangerous to projects of social and political containment and repression. Education that is ideologically encumbered is of course, no education at all. As Samantha Hill has argued, "Ideological thinking forecloses our ability to discern by flattening the plurality of the human condition, destroying our ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, right and wrong." [1] This alarming permeability and ultimate ascendancy of untruth and unseriousness is of course, elaborated through and enabled by a seeming limitlessness of social media. Indeed, the frequency and embeddedness of disinformation and the cynical manipulation of narratives-presented-as-facts are commonplace in the velocity and powerful reach of AI. Education unencumbered is anathema to authoritarianism. Our broad purpose as educators is to instigate positive social change and to model the responsibilities of citizenship, no matter what the discipline. To repurpose an idea from Marshall Berman, our aim is to help our students to find their aspirations in their learning experience; to see their capacities as not only present but also resonant in the world; and to recognize themselves as "participants and protagonists" in the thought, the culture, the politics of their own times. [2] The premise of this paper is that these issues and contestations must be taken up with urgency by educators, articulated in our philosophies of education, and actualized in teaching and learning. As the most innovative and influential work toward the advancement of education as a democratic prerequisite has long been driven by educational philosophy and the politics of education, so current and emergent applied educational philosophy is vital in fortifying democratic principles. In a world of precarity where the students we encounter are anxious and unsettled, the classroom, the front line of pedagogy, must be continually revised and renewed to exemplify democratic educational, and more broadly, democratic societal principles.

Keywords: *educational philosophy; democratic education; politics of education*

1. Introduction

It's appropriate to begin with a big idea about education and the young, an idea that offers an elegant and urgent insight into the purpose of education writ large. One turns to Marshall Ganz's reflections on leadership, social movements, civil society and renewal for inspiration.[3] Ganz interprets theologian Walter Brueggemann's notion of the "prophetic imagination" to posit a rather poetic account of how the young—our students—can and must see themselves as relevant in and indeed, instigators of change. Ganz is concerned with how young people "come of age", how they understand and commit to projects of social change, and how they ultimately renew the world around them. He contends that a combination of "criticality" and "hope" lie at the heart of renewal. First, the young must acquire a critical eye needed to recognize the world's "pain"; and second, they must achieve and sustain hope, a recognition of the world's possibilities and a commitment to action to address and actualize such possibilities. In sum then, the tools for renewal are a critical, informed, and astute eye and a "hopeful heart", a recognition of and engagement with societal and global issues and urgencies, and a drive and dedication to engage with and act upon the world to bring about social change. And irrefutably, the site for this never-ending transformative experience is education.

2. “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” -Nelson Mandela, 1990

These are undeniably perilous times. Education is squarely in the crosshairs of authoritarian governments that demand educational institutions capitulate and comply with ideological prescription. Indeed, the impoverishment of education plays a key role in efforts by political leaders around the globe to erode democratic values and shift governments toward authoritarianism. Stuart Hall's prescient notion of “authoritarian populism” [4] argued that authoritarian-minded governments incited their populations to fear “migrant invasions, radical left-wing subversion, the liberalization of sex and gender norms”, and more.[5] Anxiety and “moral panic” translate most effectively into many forms of illiberalism as populist leaders create, amplify, and fuel irrational fear and espouse nativism over pluralism, isolation over engagement, self-righteousness and absolutism over dialogue and civil debate. Such regimes vigorously devise and enact policy that summarily disqualifies and disables those viewpoints with which it disagrees. According to the most authoritative tracking of the health of democracy around the globe—the V-Dem Institute which “produces the largest global dataset on democracy with over 31 million data points for 202 countries”—almost three-quarters of the global population live in societies defined as “autocracies”. [6]

The political playbook on the achievement of authoritarian forms of government is clear: contest, undermine, and nullify truth and the independence of education. Such a project involves, among other strategies of delegitimization, attacking the judiciary, attacking the media, and attacking institutions of higher learning particularly if those institutions are committed to independent and unfettered inquiry, and in broad terms, those educational institutions that see their responsibilities in terms of an unwavering dedication to truth, justice, debate and dissent, civility, ethicality, compassion, independence and more. As Putin opined in his year-end news conference in 2023 as he launched his 25th year in supreme power, “Wars are won not by commanders but by schoolteachers ”.[7] For autocrats then, the curriculum, the purview, and the purpose in education must be controlled and imbued with values, practices, and goals that support the state's preferred and often nationalist and nativist ideology. Simply stated, education along with other independent institutions is unsettlingly transformed into a political weapon.

3. On Educational Philosophy

The argument presented here is that an articulated and actionable educational philosophy is ever more urgent and vital in times of widespread political interference; that is, when educational institutions capitulate under the force of ideologically driven defunding and demands for curriculum to comply with favoured viewpoints of a government in power; and in attacks on educational independence which are troublingly indicative of an erosion of democratic values. Learning outcomes vary widely from discipline to discipline, institution to institution, but whether pure academic or professional studies, whether theoretical or applied, whether the arts and humanities, the social sciences, the hard sciences, business and marketing, education law, and much more, context matters and matters deeply.

Education is embedded in prevailing sociocultural, political and economic currents and conditions. Such conditions mean that all research and teaching conducted is within a broader context of determinants—a fact that led Paulo Freire to characterize education as infinitely more than a matter of transmitting knowledge. Rather, in “critical pedagogy”, education is an act of social transformation. Freire argued that education functions either as an “instrument of conformity” that integrates the young into the “logic” of the status quo or as a “practice of freedom” which empowers the young to achieve agency and to act upon, challenge, and transform their world.[8] Pedagogy is a “living project” to use Henry Giroux's phrase, and educational philosophies are more vital than ever in the rise of authoritarianism and the erosions of civic culture because universities are sites for the defense of democracy.[9]

There is a distinction to make here between educational philosophy and the separate and formal disciplinary field of the “philosophy of education”, a sub-field of applied philosophy with its own immense and time-honoured scholarship. As with the philosophy of law, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of bioethics, and other discipline-specific focuses, the philosophy of education is concerned with the nature and aims of education. With its origins in the 4th century BCE, the

philosophy of education has been a foundational concern in questions around the nature, quality, and purpose of education as an ameliorative and moral project. In all, the philosophy of education explores normative questions and theories around education. The argument presented here however, uses the more generalized phrase, “educational philosophy” and meant to democratize and make accessible the notion that all education and all educators should—and in the prevailing autocratic projects of dismantling higher education—must reflect upon their pedagogical purpose, articulate that purpose, and activate that purpose.

It should be emphasized as Randall Curran points out, “Philosophy of education is...concerned not only with philosophical questions about education as such but with larger questions of education policy and the roles of educational institutions in society.”[10] In other words, educational philosophy is less concerned with empirical methods of experimentation for data mining and data measurement to draw generally discrete, necessarily narrowly focused conclusions on methodologies and experimentation outcomes. In contrast, the philosophy of education pursues overarching ideas and principles, questions and concerns about the very nature of education and its relationships, aspirations, and transformative significance in relation to broader social and political orders, conditions, and determinants. In a similar vein, Harvey Siegel calls the philosophy of education “looking both inward to the parent discipline of philosophy and outward to educational practice.” Pedagogical approaches then are both, and perhaps in equal measures, theoretical/critical and applied/practical. In any case as Siegel concludes, “thoughtful and defensible educational practice depends upon philosophical awareness and understanding.”[11]

The most consequential focus of educational philosophy is on social and political determinants of education and on the power of education as an instigator and steward of social change. John Dewey argued vigorously that philosophy is “thinking” that is “occasioned by an unsettlement” and aimed at responding to and overcoming “disturbance”. In this way, a philosophy of education is foundational to the capacity of educational learning to address societal problems. As Dewey noted, “the business of schooling tends to become a routine empirical affair unless its aims and methods are animated by such a broad and sympathetic survey of its place in contemporary life as it is the business of philosophy to provide.”[12] The significance and urgency of a philosophy of education cannot be overstated. Education must serve to vitalize and sustain democracy and indeed, at stake in our educational futures is nothing less than the well-being and advance of democratic society.

The progress of imaginative and consequential pedagogical practices is predicated on a concept of education that is expansive and unbiased, and our research into the subject of education is as much about ideas and philosophy as about empirical methodology and data yield. Clearly, these dimensions of pedagogical practice are not mutually exclusive. However, it is important to recognize that some of the most prescient, influential and enduring works in the innovation and advancement of education have been in the areas of philosophy, applied philosophy, and the politics of education, and such works have been provocative and transformative. This is not so much a critique of empiricism as it is an advocacy for expansive agendas of research and teaching in education that are unencumbered by constrained views of education inquiry that privilege only empirical method and foreclose on the nuances and complexities of context—sociocultural, political, economic, and other critical determinants.

4. “Doing” Democracy

The decision this year of renowned philosopher Jason Stanley, the former Jacob Urowsky Professor of Philosophy at Yale University, to flee the U.S. to take up a position at the University of Toronto’s Monk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy offers an instructive, and alarming example of the fallout of the authoritarian strategy to weaken higher education and undermine educational independence. Stanley, whose scholarship focuses on the ascendancy, historical and current, of authoritarianism and fascism, has argued forcefully that the “assault on history” in the U.S. and other fully authoritarian regimes is in fact, a wider “transnational movement with deep historical precedent”, part of a larger “global attack on liberal democracy.”[13] Central in this authoritarian project are the attacks on education and the revision of education to support anti-democratic agenda and entrench and legitimize authoritarian narratives (such as instilling a reverence for authoritarian leader). Among the responsibilities that Stanley identifies within liberal democracies is the frontline commitment to education that prioritizes and proceeds on the foundational democratic values of freedom and equality.

Such strategies are in abundant and compelling evidence in the assaults on education and other sources of independent information around the globe. A fulsome account of the weapons of choice for authoritarianism include undermining elections, muzzling the media, attacking the judiciary, eroding civil society, and destroying the foundations and articulations of educational autonomy, particularly in institutions of higher learning.

The need for educators on the front lines to speak out with force and consequence has never been more urgent. This is the moment if there ever was one to engage with the public sphere to communicate why and how universities matter. Academic insularity is not an option and indeed, education faces an existential threat. A vivid example is the dismantling of the Department of Education in the U.S and its \$220 billion in funding from Congress. In her declaration of the Department's "final mission", education secretary Linda McMahon stated that the enfeebling and ultimate eradication of the Department was true to the government's goal of "combatting critical race theory, DEI, gender ideology, discrimination in admissions, promoting school choice for every child, and restoring patriotic education and civics." [14] Harvard President Alan Garber's response to the inflammatory claims, insults, and extortionary threats by Secretary McMahon in her letter to Harvard on May 5, 2025 [15] is worthy of consideration. Garber refuses to capitulate to government demands as he notes that the goals of his institution "are undermined and threatened by the federal government's overreach into the constitutional freedoms" and that the university "will not surrender its core, legally protected principles out of fear of unfounded retaliation by the federal government." [16] This is not an isolated case but rather indicative of a wider "current siege on higher education," as Debra Thompson puts it. In her view, there is a "targeted degradation of democratic norms", a vigorous, coordinated and purposeful government assault on higher learning through fear, coercion, threat, and shakedown. [17]

Ideological encumbrances imposed by governments seeking to erase history and truth and flatten the richness of cultural diversity and pluralities are the signatures of authoritarian education. As Hill argues, biased and ideologically loaded educational curricula destroys "our ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, right and wrong". [18] Our compelling purpose as educators through our research and teaching is to inspire and guide positive and sustained social change and to do so by modelling the responsibilities of citizenship. In the deleterious rise of authoritarianism, democratic progressive education demonstrates that the world is not a given, an inevitability to which one must adapt. Rather, progressive education approaches the world not as a given, but rather as transformable by students who learn to be, in Freire's terms, "unquietly critical".

5. Conclusion

Higher education is facing existential challenges on numerous fronts. Most prominently, AI has unsettled, even subverted pedagogical assumptions and practices, especially in terms of assessment, and has led to an ever-expanding concern with the very method and purpose of the modern university. Democratic educational values and principles are already under stress by the contouring of education under neoliberal managerial and competition-driven models of education in which the test reigns supreme and in which scores are the measure of success of education that standardizes and teaches to the test. However, the most daunting of crises is authoritarianism around the globe and as Henry Giroux describes it, a "war against reason, critical education, and thinking itself." [19] The argument here regards the relationship between the goals of democratic pedagogy and the resistance to authoritarian education as inextricable. Stated differently, the educational philosophies and principles that hold democratic pedagogy as unassailable also articulate and enact resistance to authoritarian education.

At the conclusion, it is appropriate to return to Ganz's reflection on how the young come of age, how they commit to social change, and how they transform and renew the world around them with equal measures of criticality and hope. As authoritarianism summarily forecloses on both of these aspirations, as it limits learning capacities, as it erases history to control the future, as it prescribes educational goals in terms of ideological agenda, as it engages in results-based political management, as its hierarchical and unidirectional imperatives limit, indeed purposely stifle imagination, the task is clear for all educators who accept their roles as stewards of fact and truth in knowledge creation and dissemination. Echoing Freire's contention that education cannot be neutral and that educators need

to engage with issues of power and justice, Ronald Daniels, the President of Johns Hopkins has argued that “Our institutions of higher learning can be neither indifferent nor passive in the face of democratic backsliding.”[20] The crisis facing democratic values around the globe is irrefutably and urgently an issue for education. No matter the discipline, we are educating citizens for a democratic society. The university’s pursuit of truth, as Hannah Arendt observed, exposed it to the “dangers arising from social and political power.”[21] In these undeniable conditions of precarity for higher education, this is surely the moment to model, to nurture, and to sustain democratic values in our educational philosophies and pedagogical practices.

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