

## Between Ideology and Ideals: Responding to Pseudo-education

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The meaning of education is under attack, Doron Yosef-Hassidim warns. Problems are evident in popular discourse and also in scholarly writing. Popular discourse recognizes that education is “an intellectual[ly] formative idea,” which “carries immense historical, cultural, and social value that grants it respect, admiration, and even awe.” Nonetheless, this discourse is plagued by truncated, incoherent, and vague language. One strand of popular discourse, for example, claims that student autonomy involves “re-performing” a teacher’s actions without assistance. In “a culture of ‘do it yourself’ and i-devices,” such discourse may *seem* to promote autonomy, Yosef-Hassidim observes. In reality, however, autonomy is reduced to a “false sense of independence... empty [of] any serious self-governance or freedom.” Popular discourse about autonomy thus appeals to a worthy educational aim, even as it also distorts and disguises this aim. Yosef-Hassidim calls this ruse, “pseudo-education.” Pseudo-educational discourses, he maintains, “threaten the vitality of education.”

The meaning of education is also threatened by the Israeli scholar, Yizhar Smilansky (Yizhar). According to Yosef-Hassidim, Yizhar faults his fellow academics for putting too much weight on the clairvoyance and volition of educators to “penetrate” souls, announce outcomes in advance of engaging with children, and decide which aspects of society should be perpetuated. Yizhar thinks this conception of education is arrogant, empty, and overly-utopian. He therefore wants to abandon education and replace it with a more modest concept, which he calls, instruction. Unlike education, instruction “does not pretend to do but things that people know to do and can do,” Yizhar argues. But eschewing education for instruction worries Yosef-Hassidim no less than disguising education through popular discourse.

Specifically, Yizhar's abandonment of education "reifies the instrumental approach to education," Yosef-Hassidim writes, and may even be "a major root cause for exchanging education with" pseudo-educational discourses.

While Yizhar's ideas are intriguing, I agree with Yosef-Hassidim that they are also problematic. Within the parameters of a PES essay, Yosef-Hassidim can offer only a short summary of Yizhar's argument concerning instruction. Nonetheless, without knowing more about Yizhar's thinking, it is difficult to ascertain whether his valorization of instruction represents an abandonment of education, as Yosef-Hassidim contends, or whether Yizhar instead retains a view of education, but one that is weak and ineffective because it isolates instruction from other educational practices.

Thus, rather than pursue Yosef-Hassidim's discussion of Yizhar, I will focus my comments on his conceptual analysis of education and the distinction he draws between education and pseudo-education. I think Yosef-Hassidim's analysis contains three intriguing insights that he does not explicitly articulate, but which I think are worth exploring. In what follows, I will identify these implicit insights and will also suggest how they could be developed.

Yosef-Hassidim's first implicit insight concerns a feature that distinguishes ideals from other concepts. Conceptual analyses typically identify general formal criteria that are necessary for plausible or acceptable understandings of a concept. For example, philosophers compare the concept of education with other similar concepts, such as training and socialization, in order to specify features of education that distinguish it from its "close cousins." Philosophers also contrast education with concepts such as indoctrination in order to justify how and why indoctrination is anti-educational.<sup>1</sup>

Yosef-Hassidim is also concerned with conceptualizing education properly. But rather than treat education in the abstract, Yosef-Hassidim examines how education is conceptualized in empirical examples of popular discourse. He then contrasts these empirical examples against his own normative theories (i.e., education "is a lofty formative notion with social and

ethical aspirations”) and also against other normative academic arguments (i.e., Gert Biesta’s argument that education always implies relationship). The normative theoretical conceptualizations of education that Yosef-Hassidim invokes constitute a “contrast class,” which makes it possible for him to expose the reductive assumptions of pseudo-education that undergird popular discourse. In contrast to popular discourse, Yosef-Hassidim’s normative contrast class envisions what we might call genuine education or ideal education.

Viewing popular discourse through the lens of normative ideals, Yosef-Hassidim points to an interesting phenomenon: popular discourse promotes education as a normative ideal that students and teachers can actually and fully realize. Popular discourse proclaims, for instance, that acting on one’s own is an outcome all students can achieve. Acting on one’s own, however, is not the same thing as acting autonomously, as Yosef-Hassidim shows. Moreover, whereas acting on one’s own may be fully achievable (at least for some students), no human being can ever become fully autonomous. Autonomy instead is aspirational, i.e., it is an ideal aim toward which teachers and students can continually strive.

Popular discourse thus confuses autonomy with acting on one’s own. It further promises students that autonomy—or its reductive version of autonomy—is fully achievable. In this way, popular discourse co-opts the “sanctity” of an educational ideal in order to serve its own neo-liberal self-interest. Distinguishing the false promises of popular discourse from the aspirational nature of educational ideals would strengthen Yosef-Hassidim’s discussion of why popular discourse promotes pseudo-education, not genuine education.

Yosef-Hassidim’s second implicit insight concerns methodology. His argument that popular discourse co-opts (or seeks to co-opt) ideal education for its own narrow interests exemplifies a kind of ideological critique.<sup>2</sup> But whereas ideological critique typically presumes that ideals are effects of power relations, Yosef-Hassidim assumes that features of ideal education can and should be identified apart from discourses that seek to distort this ideal. He further assumes that identifying features of ideal education can and should guide real-world action (i.e., exposing how popular discourse promotes pseu-

do-education, not genuine education).

Insofar as Yosef-Hassidim draws on ideal education to specify and evaluate problems in real-world discourse, his methodology resembles non-ideal theorizing.<sup>3</sup> But whereas most examples of non-ideal theorizing endeavor to specify how real-world conditions fail to fully comply with the demands of an ideal (typically, the ideal of justice), Yosef-Hassidim's theorizing does not focus on real-world *constraints*. Rather, it exposes real-world *deception*. Endeavoring to co-opt ideal education for its own interests, popular discourse does not simply fall short of an ideal. On the contrary: it pretends this ideal is fully achievable.

In sum, by exposing the deceptiveness of pseudo-education, Yosef-Hassidim engages in a type of ideological critique that nevertheless takes ideals seriously. At the same time, by drawing on ideal education to evaluate and respond to real-world educational discourse, Yosef-Hassidim engages in a kind of non-ideal theorizing. But Yosef-Hassidim's theorizing presumes that real-world discourse is not simply constrained and non-ideal: it is misleading and ideological. We thus might say that Yosef-Hassidim's strategy for exposing pseudo-education partakes of both ideological critique and also non-ideal theorizing without strictly adhering to either methodology. I think Yosef-Hassidim's strategy may represent a type of analysis that lies in between ideological critique and non-ideal theorizing—or that perhaps transcends both types of analysis to envision a new methodology.

Finally, more explicit and sustained attention to the substantive make-up of ideal education would strengthen Yosef-Hassidim's analysis. To be sure, claims about ideal education appear throughout the paper. I applaud Yosef-Hassidim for drawing on a range of theorists, including his own ideas and the ideas of educational practitioners, to craft his view of ideal education. I would like to know more about how he would bring these various positions together in order to more fully develop his vision.

Additionally, I encourage Yosef-Hassidim to consider dimensions of ideal education that he does not address in this essay. For example, while

Yosef-Hassidim stresses the formative aspect of ideal education, he says little about education's civic function. Attending to the civic dimension of education would not only enhance Yosef-Hassidim's analysis, it could also be pedagogically generative. Pseudo-education is seductive, in part because it seeks to convince people that the practices and aims of genuine education are—or ought to be—achievable and obvious. At a deeper level, pseudo-education suggests that negotiating differences is undesirable, unnecessary, and perhaps impossible, and that holding onto one's views instead should be the norm.

The civic dimension of education highlights a contrasting view: in real-world educational contexts, ethics and values conflict. Engaging with conflict does not diminish education as an ideal. On the contrary: debating conflicting views could help people understand that ethics and values are constitutive of any endeavor that we legitimately call education. Learning to engage in constructive debate not only promotes a healthy society, it can also help people recognize and resist the seductive deceptions of pseudo-education. Engaging with the civic dimension of ideal education thus is not a futile abstract exercise, as pseudo-education suggests. On the contrary: engaging the civic aspect of ideal education can be liberating.

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1 For a concise explanation of conceptual analysis in education, see Robin Barrow, "Education, Concept Of," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy Volume 1*, D.C. Phillips, ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014).

2 For more about ideological critique, see John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

3 For more about non-ideal theorizing, see Harry Brighouse, "Nonideal Theorizing in Education," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 2 (2015): 215-231.