

Death, Rust Cohle, and Education

Kip Kline

Lewis University

[Death is the] possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all.

—Heidegger

But my death — my corpse, my blood poured out on this gravel, among these plants, in this smiling garden — would have been superfluous as well. I was superfluous to all eternity.

—Roquentin (in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*)

We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self. This accretion of sensory experience and feeling, programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody when, in fact, everybody's nobody.

—Rust Cohle (in HBO's *True Detective*)

A call for a vision of education that diverts the focus away from neoliberal ideology and, as Doron Yosef-Hassidim puts it, in which “school becomes less a place of exercising and training skills” could not be more timely. Indeed, the current discursive and policy milieu in education has created what Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and I have recently called a potential “future of machine-like schooling, perhaps without as many physical school buildings in it, and in which the relational, embodied work of education further fades into the background.”¹ Questions of self or of being/Being/Dasein as constitutive of education’s “role and goal,” as Yosef-Hassidim puts it, are preferable to what seems to be a continual procession into deeper levels of mechanization and technicization. As the human element in education is disappearing, Yosef-Hassidim’s attempt to bring Heidegger’s Dasein to bear on educational discourse is most welcome.

Yosef-Hassidim argues for an increased interaction between Heidegger and education in two ways: he claims that pedagogy was central to Heidegger’s philosophy and, therefore, has particular relevance for education; and, more importantly in my view, that Heidegger’s existentialism could inspire a more desirable animating force for education than what currently exists. I will spend the majority of this response interacting with the second general argument. The notion that philosophers of education should pay attention to Heidegger because his philosophy is pedagogical takes attention away from the larger and more valuable argument about Dasein and the goals of education. There is an argument to be made that there is sense in which all philosophy intersects with pedagogy and certainly some philosophers of education see little distinction between the two. To claim that Heidegger’s work in some way intersects with pedagogy does little to distinguish it from the corpus of other philosophers when viewed from a philosopher of education’s vantage point.

The claim that those of us concerned about education can look to Heidegger for some kind of amelioration with regard to the problems of the status quo is, however, worth exploring in more detail. To begin, Yosef-Hassidim says that he is not making “logical inferences” from Heidegger’s thought, but that his suggestions for education are Heidegger-inspired. I take Yosef-Hassidim’s central idea, based on a

brief exploration of Heidegger's ontology, to be that we should recast the notion of education so that it is "better aligned with the phenomenon of being a human being." This realignment means both a broader revision of education's central goal and, more specifically, a new approach to the role of content in schooling. With regard to the former, it is more than just a goal for schooling, since it "is an overall goal that is relevant for one's life in general." This parallels the way in which Heidegger's "voice of conscience is in a way constantly in the background of Dasein's existence." And because everything one learns throughout one's life should be considered useful for examining the meaning of being a human being, the Heidegger-inspired goal of education "is not suggested here simply as one possible goal among a series of educational goals, nor as a major educational goal, but is posed as *the only* educational goal that the student should carry with her beyond schooling into the rest of her life."

This goal, which Yosef-Hassidim claims might be entirely constitutive of education's aims, leads to a suggestion about the role of content in educational institutions. He says: "Since education should be in line with the existential pursuit after Being beyond beings, I suggest an alternative ground for curricula ... that is not content-focused, but rather shifts from acquiring knowledge and skills toward an examination of having possibilities." He proposes moving content out of its central role and replacing it with questions of humanity in order to avoid content being "perceived as an object within the subject-object divide."

Taken together, this Heidegger-inspired goal for education and its accompanying revision of the role of content in schooling leads Yosef-Hassidim to conclude that "existential education shifts our focus *from 'can' to 'want'*: from an education that is focused almost solely on students' abilities to one that gives more space to their dreams, wonders, and doubts." I find this to be at the same time desirable and, unfortunately, a bit wide-eyed. While I am in no way opposed to a Heidegger-inspired challenge to the discursive and policy status quo in education (quite the contrary), Yosef-Hassidim's project would be strengthened by giving more attention to context and thereby might be better able to answer the potential question — "Why Heidegger?"

The full potential of the Heidegger-inspired argument is not realized because it is largely disarticulated from two important contexts: the existential crisis in education and the context of Heidegger's philosophy. First, I am highly sympathetic to an existential *response*. In the context of the existential *crisis* in education, however, which is only gestured at in Yosef-Hassidim's article, his "anticipated shift" from "perceiving education as a system that operates *on* students (by teachers, curriculum, bureaucracy) to a site where collaboration is done *with* students" is left standing in the face of considerable obstacles, including a trajectory in which education and schooling are becoming increasingly technicized, standardized, and corporatized. In my view, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which the deeply entrenched hyper-instrumentalism that animates the status quo in education threatens any existential reenvisioning. If such reenvisioning is to have any efficacy, it must seriously engage with that threat.

It is also important in an argument for a Heidegger-infused recasting of education's goals to interact seriously with the philosophical context, in this case, the

context of Heidegger's Dasein. If what we are ultimately after is for existential questions to be at the center of our ideas about the role of education, why should we choose Heidegger as the inspiration? Why not Nietzsche's distinct and yet somewhat parallel ideas? Why not Sartre? Or Sartre's Roquentin, for that matter? Even the television character Rust Cohle might inspire a recasting of the goals of education in the direction of questions of being/Being. Of course, there is a case to be made that Heidegger is preferable to fictional characters (and perhaps even to Nietzsche or Sartre), but that case requires further engagement with context than Yosef-Hassidim offers. For instance, what should we make of Heidegger's break from Husserl with regard to ontology? And what are the implications for education? What response might be given to Adorno's critique of Heidegger's ontology? I am not suggesting that these particular questions constitute the exclusive path to contextualizing the argument. Rather, I raise them as examples of the kinds of questions that might help make a stronger case for why Heidegger, specifically, should provide the inspiration for an existentially driven education.

Finally, and to return to the quotes at the beginning of this essay, I suggest that a Heidegger-inspired recasting of education's goals could be thickened with more thoroughgoing interaction with Heidegger's own themes, specifically, death. Yosef-Hassidim does briefly consider death in the context of Dasein, but not enough to trouble the rather idyllic picture of school as a possible place of collaboration and the joint teacher-student pursuit of questions of being a human. My point here is that any deeply existential way of animating education or schooling necessarily yields confrontation with anxieties of existence and death and may not be as clean as Yosef-Hassidim's conclusions suggest. When the center of education and its singular goal is to examine the meaning of being a human being, it is certainly plausible that this might include confronting the notion of the superfluity of one's existence, like Roquentin, or even perhaps wrestling with the possibility of the illusion of self, like Rust Cohle. These and other death-related notions are anxiety-producing hallmarks of existentialism to which any existentialist vision of education should give meticulous attention. I find Yosef-Hassidim's emergent project to be worthy of such attention.

1. Kip Kline and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz, "Moving Out of the Cellar: A New (?) Existentialism for a Future Without Teachers," *Critical Questions in Education* 4 no. 2 (2013): 156–167.