EDUCATIONAL THEORY

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SYMPOSIUM INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTRUMENTALISM

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This collection of essays on the politics of instrumentalism is based on papers originally presented at the fifth symposium of the Studies of Conflict, Culture, and the Political in Education (SCAPE) research network hosted by the Center for Public Education and Pedagogy at Maynooth University in Maynooth, Ireland. They were significantly revised and expanded for this symposium. The essays included here are connected not only by the symposium's theme, which I will discuss below, but also by SCAPE's concerns about the roles dissensus, disagreement, and conflict play in the formation of education and democracy.[1] Under this set of terms, the initial symposium gathered to consider the strange bedfellows that instrumentalism makes of contrary political stances. For instance, even with the polemics and long-standing critiques of neoliberal theories of education, the idea that education should serve as a means toward realizing a better society remains a shared feature of neoliberal education reform and its sharpest critics. This point is not to reduce one to the other, but instead to highlight the powerful sway that instrumentalism holds for our theories of education. And while instrumentalism may appear to be a natural part of education and therefore the ground for a consensus beyond the need for a politics, the articles contained here are concerned with the politics and dissent obscured by the normative role instrumentalism plays in educational theory and policy.

While the politics of instrumentalism is a relatively new concern for educational theory, the topic of instrumentalism is not. Within educational theory, there exists a general critique of instrumentalism that emphasizes its reductive logic as harmful to the noninstrumental values of education, warning particularly against the conflation of education with learning,[2] and there is also research that takes an explicitly anti-instrumentalist stance.[3] Conversely, there is work that views the

1. For more on the scope and work of SCAPE, see http://blogs.ubc.ca/scape/.

2. Gert Biesta, "Against Learning: Reclaiming a Language for Education in an Age of Learning," *Nordic Studies in Education (Nordisk Pedagogikk)* 23, no. 1 (2004): 70–82, https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1891-5949-2004-01-06; Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "The Governmentalization of Learning and the Assemblage of a Learning Apparatus," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 391–415, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00296.x; and Gert Biesta, "Why 'What Works' Still Won't Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29 (2010): 491–503, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-010-9191-x.

3. Tyson E. Lewis, "Education for Potentiality (against Instrumentality)," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 7 (2020): 878–891, https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210320922742.

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instrumentalism conceived by John Dewey as a better form of instrumentalism for theorizing education than narrower, often economically motivated forms.[4] Addressing education policy, research warns against forms of instrumentalism that reduce education to a means toward economic ends from individual to international levels,[5] and there is work that asks whether more laudable instrumental ambitions such as equal opportunities for all can actually be achieved.[6] Additionally, Tomasz Szkudlarek and I have coedited a special issue on the relation of ontology and instrumentalism that considers the modes of education prompted when asking about the differences between what education *is* and what education *is for*.[7]

In the wake of these refining and critical attempts directed toward instrumentalism, educational theory and policy studies have turned toward conceptualizing and practicing education in noninstrumental ways. Deborah Osberg and Gert Biesta offer a sense of the noninstrumental for educational theory that attends to the emergent qualities of education apart from planned means and ends.[8] Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski discuss their postcritical sense of education as rooted noninstrumentally in a hope for the present.[9] Taylor Webb and Kalervo Gulson suggest a move away from policy informed by the

4. Terry Hyland, "Vocational Reconstruction and Dewey's Instrumentalism," *Oxford Review of Education* 19, no. 1 (1993): 89–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498930190107; Peter J. Nelsen, "A Deweyan Approach to Integrity in an Age of Instrumental Rationality," in *Philosophy of Education 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 58–66; and Deborah Seltzer-Kelly, "Deweyan Darwinism for the Twenty-First Century: Toward an Educational Method for Critical Democratic Engagement in the Era of the Institute of Education Sciences," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 3 (2008): 289–304, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00289.x.

5. Stephen J. Ball, "What Is Policy? 21 Years Later: Reflections on the Possibilities of Policy Research," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 3 (2015): 306–313; Eric Bredo, "Is Educational Policy Making Rational — And What Would That Mean, Anyway?," *Educational Theory* 59, no. 5 (2009): 533–547, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2009.00336.x; Chris Higgins, "The Possibility of Public Education in an Instrumentalist Age," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011): 451–466, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2011.00414.x; and Joanna Williams, "Constructing Social Inclusion through Further Education — the Dangers of Instrumentalism," *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 32, no. 2 (2008): 151–160, https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770801911095.

6. Gert Biesta, "Perfect Education, But Not for Everyone: On Society's Need for Inequality and the Rise of Surrogate Education," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 66, no. 1 (2020): 8–14.

7. Tomasz Szkudlarek and F. Tony Carusi, "What and What for? Theorizing Ontology and Instrumentality of Education," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 7 (2020): 824–936.

8. Deborah Osberg and Gert Biesta, "Beyond Curriculum: Groundwork for a Non-instrumental Theory of Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 1 (2021): 57–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1750362.

9. Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2017).

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instrumentalism that both traditional and critical policy studies have relied on,[10] and I have elsewhere highlighted the noninstrumental dimensions of education policy that engender a world to support policy's instrumental rationality.[11] Taken together, the growing concern for the topic of non/instrumentalism[12] in education studies sparks questions regarding the ways a politics positions instrumentalism in education, and whether theorizing education as noninstrumental may also require a politics that takes education outside of itself even in the autotelic demand for education as an end-in-itself.

This symposium takes non/instrumentalism as a political problematic. Rather than naming education as instrumental or not, the articles collected here consider the ways that such naming occurs. As a collective engagement with different senses of non/instrumentalism, each article focuses on what politics are evoked by instrumentalism or its shadow noninstrumentalism. And the shadow metaphor is apt. As Claudia Ruitenberg and Tomasz Szkudlarek point out, the relationship between the two is not so easily disentangled. Ruitenberg sets a tension between the two that has a constitutive effect, such that neither can be entirely exclusive of the other. By paying attention to the deconstruction that takes place between the useful and the useless, her article claims that education cannot be reduced to either. Through a parallel between art and education "for its own sake," Ruitenberg explores queer uses that blur the useful and useless across multiple contexts and media to show the instability of intentions and outcomes that prevent art and education from being categorized as means or ends, for their own sake or otherwise. Consequently, theories of education that cleave strictly to one side or the other of an instrumentalism debate are misguided at best when they make "pure" claims about the instrumentality of education or its lack. Alternatively, Ruitenberg suggests that debates about the relationship between education and instrumentalism may be generative insofar as they engage in a politics (and counterpolitics) of instrumentalism through claims about what ends are worth striving for.

Developing the inseparability of instrumentalism and noninstrumentalism further, Szkudlarek's article shows that one can indissociably, even enjoyably, morph into the other. This article highlights the recent focus in educational theory on noninstrumentalism to suggest a more complex relationship with educational instrumentality, a relationship that prevents noninstrumentalism from escaping instrumentalization, even in its autotelic forms that think of education as an end-in-itself. Through a reinterpretation of Martin Heidegger's ready-to-hand and

10. P. Taylor Webb and Kalervo N. Gulson, "Policy Scientificity 3.0: Theory and Policy Analysis in-and-for This World and Other-Worlds," *Critical Studies in Education* 56, no. 1 (2015): 161–174, https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2014.949812.

11. F. Tony Carusi, "The Ontological Rhetorics of Education Policy: A Non-instrumental Theory," *Journal of Education Policy* 36, no. 2 (2021): 232–252, https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1665713.

12. With the term "non/instrumentalism," I write instrumentalism and noninstrumentalism together to reflect the ambiguities preventing their complete separation.

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present-at-hand distinction, Szkudlarek troubles the different kinds of being that many noninstrumental notions of education rely upon by suggesting that these kinds are instead different modes of being. For education, this means that there can be no strictly noninstrumental kind of education, but noninstrumentalism and instrumentalism are both modes of education, each potentially becoming the other. The essay concludes with some insights about the political nature of distinguishing the instrumental and the noninstrumental, particularly as attempts to do so can hide one's complicity in a broader instrumental project.

As the articles by Gert Biesta and Sharon Todd show, non/instrumentalism can be generative of and for education. For Biesta, the impossibility of separating the instrumental from the noninstrumental makes schooling into a distinctly democratic institution. His article begins with the modern appearance of the school in functional relationship to society. This relationship leads directly to a question of the politics of instrumentalism in the sense that the relationship limits the roles schools can perform within the conditions of society. In its functional operations, Biesta distinguishes between the school as an institution and as an instrument. Where Ruitenberg shows us that education is never purely instrumental or noninstrumental, Biesta's article offers readers a sense in which this impossibility of being either pole is generative of school as a democratic institution, that is, an institution that is both functional and dysfunctional in relation to society in specifically educational terms. Readers find here a notion of school that, in its institutional form, is able both to invite and to resist the society for which it is functional and dysfunctional by attending closely to its institutional concern for education, which Biesta argues is a concern for the grown-up existence of a new generation.

Todd conceptualizes a weak instrumentalism that emerges from the tension between the old and the new, reflecting a "doubleness" of education: education both introduces and breaks from traditions and values. She positions education's doubleness as an irreducible tension that undoes what she terms a "strong" instrumentalism, a form of instrumentalism that directs education toward predetermined and external (often economic) ends. However, Todd acknowledges the horizon toward which education is directed, a horizon that prevents the complete erasure of instrumentalism, and instead calls for a "weak" instrumentalism that proceeds unscripted but with purpose. The shift to a weak version of instrumentalism is signaled by the change from form to formation, a change that sees education as a relational formation from which forms emerge. In Todd's approach, educational formations entail an aesthetic sense of education as a living, sensuous practice. Exemplified through experimental educational projects aimed at embodied sense conducted by Sisters Hope, Todd concludes with a politics of instrumentalism that rejects predetermined outcomes to the benefit of sensual and relational trans/formations of education.

The final set of articles display the politics involved in dissenting from instrumentalism without also laying claim to education as essentially noninstrumental. Carl Anders Säfström links market-oriented instrumentalism to a tradition

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of essentialism in philosophy of education and proposes a reconsideration of the Sophists to elicit an education that is based on, instead of a means to, democratic equality. His article considers the role that instrumentalism has played in the reform of Swedish public education to argue that through instrumental rationality, education has ceased to be connected to the public, as well as to democracy, and now favors the individual of capitalism. He premises market-oriented instrumental rationality in the search for essences brought to the classroom by individual students. Key to these essences is their neutralizing of the new that can be introduced by teaching. If a student arrives at school with abilities and skills already essential to them, teaching becomes an exercise of purification, honing those essentially placed capacities. Alternatively, Säfström conceives the public and democratic roles of education as a premise open to the novelty introduced by students and teachers. These roles are not essential to education, but they are necessary for an education that fosters social equality, particularly in an historical moment where social inequality is increasing globally.

Maria Mendel introduces the notion of retroactive instrumentalism, a phrase she coins to show how the writing of histories, and the memories they promote through curricula and other tools, becomes a way to instrumentalize the past for the present. Her article analyzes contemporary sociopolitical contexts from Poland that engage in this form of instrumentalism for multiple effects. Focusing on the educational aspects of retroactive instrumentalism, this article shows the ways that Polish curricula and education policy have been shaped through the government's strategic forgetting (or selective remembering) of Polish history, creating a historical narrative that has the success of the current neoliberal/neoconservative government as its embedded outcome. Mendel describes the arrangement of means and ends in education as a displaced intentionality of the Polish government that encourages parents and students to regard their patriotism as something that is confirmed by history and should be arrived at by means of schooling. She concludes with a consideration of Aristotle's *phantasia* to theorize a shift from pedagogies for the public that prescribe an imagined history to a public pedagogy that animates the imagination noninstrumentally.

And in the final article, I highlight teachers' acts of refusal that work to negate the instrumentalism of schools and education policy and to suggest instead a politics that works against different configurations of means and ends. I begin by analyzing the notion that teachers can "change everything," a phrase used by Aotearoa New Zealand's prime minister, to highlight the extent to which teachers have become instruments for social change. I distinguish *what teachers are for* from *what teachers are* by asking questions of instrumentalism separately from questions of being. This leads to a critique of reducing teachers to an "in-school" factor and prompts attention to those "out-of-school" areas where teachers are active as teachers, for example, in protests and attrition. I conclude by locating a politics that dissents from teacher instrumentalization and remains unseen by policies and research that focus on teachers "in-school."

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Taken together, the articles that make up this symposium complicate education as straightforwardly instrumental or not. The ability to define education as instrumental or noninstrumental cannot be divorced from the political act of naming education as a means, with or without end, or an end-in-itself. As the term non/instrumental suggests, instrumentalism and noninstrumentalism in education are an inseparable yet unstable arrangement that can set a politics in motion. When considered in terms of education, the instability of non/instrumentalism is generative of a politics of education that directs education outside of itself or turns it toward an "in-itself." Through this theory of non/instrumentalism, each article in this collection highlights the possibilities and articulations of the politics that emerge when orienting education non/instrumentally.

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