

# “One Day is a Whole World”: On the Role of the Present in Education Between Plan and Play

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## INTRODUCTION

Arendt chose to call her book of contemporary political thought *Between Past and Future*, a title that raises the question of what comes between the two.<sup>1</sup> In one sense, it is obvious; what lies there is none other than the present. But the present is not mentioned by name. I believe this is not an oversight, but rather a reflection of the fact that the present is, perhaps, the most deprived and undervalued of all times. Unlike the past, which is often seen as glorious and unspoiled, and the future that holds a promise of a better life, the fleeting present seems to lack any inherent theoretical or moral importance. Living the present, *carpe diem*, is considered a moral flaw and a surrender to desires that comes at the expense of respect for the past or careful planning for the future.

No field exemplifies the devaluation of the present better than education. In the typical school, the teacher's goal is to prepare the student for his future life as an independent adult and a productive member of society. Specifically, the teacher will do their best to help their students acquire the skills, knowledge, and qualifications that will allow them to compete successfully in the job market. By doing all that, the teacher subjects the students' present to their future, both inside the education system and outside of it. Preschool is about preparedness for elementary school, elementary school readies students for middle school, which prepares them for high school, college, and so on until they mature, and education supposedly can come to an end.

In this article, I discuss the danger of reducing education to mere preparation for the future. When this happens, the goals of education are delayed into the future, and ultimately might not be realized at all. Moreover, the present of education - its actual thought and practice - loses its specificity, and is evaluated only on the narrow basis of the future goods it promises. First, I examine this devaluation of the present, and with reference to Dewey, Rancière, and Biesta, I suggest that this is a concern shared by both traditional and progressive educators. Then, I examine the theoretical possibility of education that is not based solely on future ends. For this, I turn to Walter Benjamin's view of education, and use his insights and suggestions for a children's theater to propose a different educational relation between present and future. I argue that only when the educator views the future as unreachable directly can the present of her students appear in all its complexity. Only when education is not understood as preparing for tomorrow, can educational goals such as equality and emancipation be realized today.

## “DISTORTED PREPARATION” AND THE CONSTANT DEFERRAL OF FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

Dewey regards the future goal-orientation common to schools as “distorted preparation.”<sup>2</sup> When he looks at the quality of experience in educational contexts,

he indicates that any experience has an “influence upon later experiences,” and, therefore, he calls the educator to choose conducive experiences drawn from the student’s environment.<sup>3</sup> By doing this, the educator commits to a better future that entails personal growth and more experiential opportunities. However, this commitment to expanding the student’s experience must not be confused with turning the future into the sole end of education:

When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted. The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. ... Because traditional schools tended to sacrifice the present to a remote and more or less unknown future, therefore it comes to be believed that the educator has little responsibility for the kind of present experiences the young undergo.<sup>4</sup>

Not only is this distorted preparation self-contradictory, it is also harmful as the student is given knowledge and skills, supposedly needed for his future, at the price of losing “his own soul: his appreciation of things worthwhile, ... [his] desire to apply what he has learned and [his] ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur.”<sup>5</sup>

While Dewey is criticizing traditional schools here, this devaluation of the present and its subjection to the future is not restricted to traditional teaching. Progressive educators reject the adaptation of the student to a predetermined future, but they still face a similar challenge when preparing for tomorrow. For them, the future is necessarily open to change and, for exactly this reason, they might not have a lot of interest in the present for its own sake, but only as a passageway and a preparatory phase.

Taking the important example of equality, progressive educators tend to view the present as both a phase “still” dominated by inequality, and as a preparatory phase for the future in which equality will be realized. In both cases, the present has theoretical importance only in as much as it reflects on the desired future and plays a part in bringing it closer. In fact, this kind of “educational deferral” is much better suited for a progressive worldview than to a conservative one. Towards the end of his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière speaks of the surprising collaboration between what he calls *men of progress* and *the old masters*; between those who seek to educate and enlighten the people, and the conservative, traditional teachers. For him, “progress is the new way of saying inequality,” and instead of realizing equality in the present,<sup>6</sup> progressivists only delay it infinitely. The force of progressive pedagogy stems from the correlation between the individual child and society as a whole: like the child who approaches perfection the more he grows up and becomes farther away from his past, a society allegedly progresses from a child-like state of imperfection and ignorance to that of self-mastery and knowledge. Rancière concludes this point by declaring that “all pedagogy is spontaneously progressive,” and therefore effectively perpetuates inequality.<sup>7</sup>

In their “Manifesto for Education,” Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström follow Rancière in addressing this educational deferral, and they specify the two ways in which progressive pedagogy (or, for Rancière, just pedagogy) might “distort” preparation for the future.<sup>8</sup> They state that the main aim of education is freedom and

that, since the Enlightenment, education has been conceived as a liberating process aimed at freedom's realization.<sup>9</sup> The problem is that: "Such freedom is often projected into the future, either through a psychological argument that focuses on development of inner faculties or potential, or through a sociological argument that focuses on social change, liberation from oppression and the overcoming of inequality."<sup>10</sup> This constant postponement of the educational end at the expense of the "here and now" leads to its weakening and, paradoxically, to the eradication of freedom: "By conceiving education in terms of what is not yet – that is, by conceiving education as a process that will deliver its promises at some point in the future – the question of freedom disappears from the 'here and now' and runs the risk of being forever deferred. This locates the educational in a place beyond reach."<sup>11</sup> Simply speaking, school (or any other educational setting) is viewed as little more than a waiting room for the future, whether it is the future of individual autonomy (especially economic) or of a more just society.

These critiques of education's future-orientation can also explain the interest of educational research in predictions and correlations between present-achievement (grades, test scores) and future-success (test scores again, years of education, income). In fact, without future-success in mind as the dominating end of education, standardized testing, accountability, and other efficiency-driven methods would have not made much sense. Only when education is utilized towards predetermined future-goals, can these methods of management be considered as educational. The question, of course, is can education be done differently, and how exactly?

Dewey, perhaps typically, is somewhat confusing on this. He calls for "extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience."<sup>12</sup> But not only does this "extraction" remain somewhat vague, in many of his writings, Dewey makes claims that can easily be "distorted" themselves. For example, in "My Pedagogic Creed," perhaps his most accessible text, he does claim that "the school must represent present life" and that education "is a process of living and not a preparation for future living."<sup>13</sup> But on the other hand, just a few paragraphs later, he says: "Examinations are of use only so far as they test the child's fitness for social life and reveal the place in which he can be of most service and where he can receive the most help." He also adds that the child should be trained to exact his forces "economically and efficiently."<sup>14</sup> Even if his initial motivation is present-oriented, and I believe it certainly is, we can see how these suggestions, and countless similar ones, could be easily interpreted to serve an instrumental agenda.

Biesta and Säfström are also not very instructive. They are aware that there is no easy way to solve this educational tension between present and future, and they claim that trying to avoid it by committing solely to either the present or the future is wrong, and could lead either to turning education into a form of adaptation, or to handing it over to a future utopia. Instead, they call on educators to stay "in the tension." On the one hand: "Education under the aegis of 'what is' becomes a form of adaptation."<sup>15</sup> And on the other hand, they claim, the solution cannot be "to put education under the aegis of the 'what is not.' If we go there, we tie up education with utopian dreams." In other words, both socialization and utopian "dreaming"

are problematic: “to tie education to the ‘what is’ is to hand over responsibility for education to forces outside of education, whereas to tie education to the ‘what is not’ is to hand over education to the thin air of an unattainable future. From an educational perspective both extremes appear as irresponsible. *We therefore need to stay in the tension.*”<sup>16</sup> But how can this temporal-educational tension be maintained or encouraged? And what exactly does it mean to stay in the tension? Does it translate into pedagogy or a curriculum? Again, the answers are not clear.

But beyond a certain lack of clarity, there might be another problem that merits further attention. I think that both Dewey and the Manifesto still maintain a commitment to the future that can be redirected, and fall into the same instrumental pattern. A more radical break from this logic is needed, and Walter Benjamin offers us exactly this.

#### EDUCATING FOR THE PRESENT AND WALTER BENJAMIN’S CHILDREN’S THEATER

In 1928, Benjamin wrote a short essay titled “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater.”<sup>17</sup> This “program” is interesting not so much as an example of Marxist or proletarian education (which he had hoped it was, but it hardly is), but because it *explicitly* offers a radical break from the logic of preparation and future-orientation. Benjamin’s proposed school is set outside of the means-ends relationship, and is aimed at nothing less than the entirety of the child’s life. Although this program ultimately failed (it did not meet the expectations of the German communist functionaries, and was never tried or even discussed seriously),<sup>18</sup> it is still worthwhile to examine.

Since what is at stake is education as a means towards desired ends, before going into the details of Benjamin’s program, I present briefly his general attitude towards teleology and the means-ends relationship. For Benjamin, education at its best should be carried out as, what he calls elsewhere “pure means.” The concept of “pure means” is taken from one of his most enigmatic texts, “Critique of Violence” from 1921, in which he tried to examine violence beyond the dichotomy of ends and means, and outside the conceptual framework of the law.<sup>19</sup> In that essay, Benjamin rejected both the position according to which violent means are justified if they are used towards justified ends, and the opposite one that justifies the ends if they are reached by justified means.<sup>20</sup> Instead, he claimed that the root of the problem is in the corrupted and “degenerating” intertwining of ends and means, and he tried to devise a critique that went beyond the legal and the normative.<sup>21</sup>

In order to avoid being trapped again by the endless chain of means and ends, Benjamin appeals to what he calls “pure means.” Simply speaking, “pure means” are “means-in-themselves;” means that are not directed towards any end. They exist outside the legal-normative discourse, and are not designated towards establishing laws, norms, or routines. Benjamin discusses several instances of pure means, e.g. the biblical commandment, acts of divine violence, and the revolutionary strike. He also says that education “in its perfected form stands outside the law [i.e., outside the means-ends relation],” and that like other manifestations of “pure means” it is “absent of all lawmaking.” In the “children’s theater” essay he elaborates more on this idea, and lays out the principles for what he views as education in its perfect form, education as “pure means.”<sup>22</sup>

So how exactly is this school with no ends supposed to work? The proletarian children's theater was intended for children from the age of four to 14, and included no predetermined curriculum. Benjamin pictured it as a boarding school in which students and teachers live, study, and work together. The classes are not age-based, but revolve roughly around the different artistic disciplines involved in theatrical work: music, painting, speech, dance, stagecraft, etc. Only by refusing to learn through traditional disciplines, and engaging fully and only in theatrical work, can the whole of life, which is the true subject-matter of the "school," appear.<sup>23</sup>

The teacher's work is to "guide" the children with the technical skills and tasks, and to observe them closely. The teacher must remain in the background as much as possible and, in any case, should not suggest any ideas or content for the plays. All the initiative belongs to the children, and the teacher can only help them to develop their own ideas. Even more important than this lack of utilitarian teaching, the teacher must refrain from directly influencing or "shaping" the moral character of the students; the moral processes need to be undertaken by the children's collective itself.<sup>24</sup> The "moral personality" of the teacher must be neutralized. Direct influence is not only harmful for the development of the child, but also useless, because only the conflicts that arise within the group can lead to moral corrections. In short, the sole educators in the children's theater are "the tensions of collective labor."<sup>25</sup>

As I said, besides facilitating the various tasks involved in the theater, the teacher must observe carefully these tensions as well as the children's gestures. The child's gesture is the key concept here. The educator should train herself to suspend her attention, and learn how to become receptive to the children's unpredictable acts.

The lack of planning for the future is especially evident in the peculiar role of the final performance. Benjamin claims that the show itself is important as it enables the children to bring forward "the genius of variation to a peak of perfection,"<sup>26</sup> and allows the adult audience to be educated by watching it. But despite its importance, the performance is by no means the goal of the theater, and it should not concern the teacher. For Benjamin, the show comes about incidentally, as a side effect; far more important is the fact of improvisation: "It is the framework from which the signals, the signifying gestures, emerge. ... Childhood achievement is always aimed not at the 'eternity' of the products but at the 'moment' of the gesture. The theater is the art form of the child because it is ephemeral."<sup>27</sup>

In the gesture, then, we see something that resembles the extraction of present experience, as called for by Dewey. The child's gesture is not uttered for the sake of the final show, or for any other end, and it shouldn't be used by the teacher to teach any moral. Because the gesture is manifested through improvisation, and isn't intentionally purposeful, it suspends the "normal" order of signification. It stands outside the means-end relationship and, in its rejection of teleology, it can be viewed as an educational "pure means."

This means that Benjamin is not offering any pedagogy, and no generalizations can be applied to gestures.<sup>28</sup> In fact, despite its title, the essay could hardly be seen as a program at all, as 'pure means' are more an interruption of time, continuum, and

representation, than any basis for educational institutions or programs. It would also be a mistake to view the child's gesture as some sort of resource, especially through the psychological lens. This would see the gesture as a sign from an unconscious or repressed reality that the educator needs to interpret in order to help the children enact what was "hidden" from them.<sup>29</sup> The gesture, then, would become a resource for educational work; a mean towards the end of psychological rehabilitation. Instead, Benjamin speaks of observance and reception of the gesture, which are quite different from psychological interpretation and use. For him, what the gesture truly signals is available for the educator only once he gave up the individual psychological image of the child.

But what does the gesture truly signal? If we are attentive as Benjamin asks us to be, what shall we find? For Benjamin, the gesture is no less than a piece and a sign of the future, once the future is conceived as totally external to the present. It is "a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands," while using "the most *powerful energies of the future*."<sup>30</sup> This enigmatic view of the child and the theater is even more explicit as the essay concludes, when he states: "What is truly revolutionary [in the children's theater] is *the secret signal of what is to come that speaks from the gesture of the child*."<sup>31</sup>

The child, then, is a representative of both the future and a foreign world in which he is the sole dictator, bound to no laws or social norms. The adults who attend the performance - and this is the reason Benjamin claims that the audience is "educated" - are shown a glimpse of their future and of a reality that lies beyond legal and teleological justification.

How should these cryptic concepts be deciphered? If Benjamin's "program" sounds *utopian and spiritual*, this is certainly not a mistake. In much of his writing there is a messianic tone, and an interruption of a totalizing externality, usually accompanied by destruction and annihilation. For him, even the children's play contains a "force that will annihilate the pseudo-revolutionary gestures of the recent theater of the bourgeoisie."<sup>32</sup>

What is important is that, for Benjamin, the future is not a continuation of the present in any way. It presents itself surprisingly. It is not planned, and it isn't the object of preparation. The present, for him, might hold some of the future within itself, but not in a controlled or predictable cause-and-effect way. Also, the present should not be evaluated as an "earlier version" of the future. It is radically different from it, and should be understood as the "*time of the now, which is shot through with chips of messianic time*," as Benjamin suggested in his theses on the philosophy of history.<sup>33</sup> The gesture of the child in the theater is just such a chip as it embodies present and future in a single fleeting moment. By focusing on the "here and now" of the student, the unforeseen and radically new future can appear. Moreover, only by encountering this future in all its novelty can students be truly prepared for it, in the Deweyan sense of the word.

This Benjaminian future seems to be very close to the utopian danger that worries Biesta and Säfström, but I believe it is not. There is a big difference between

acknowledging the extreme otherness of the future and giving up on it and, in fact, Biesta and Säfström admit to this otherness, and wish to maintain it. As I said before, focusing on the “time of the now” while refusing to view the future as an object of direct shaping, enables the new and unforeseen to appear in educational settings. Concentrating on the present allows the educator to extract from experience the openness of the future, which is exactly what Arendt finds in the gap between past and future mentioned at the beginning. For her, what lies in this temporal gap is “the appeal to thought [that arises] in the odd *in-between period* which sometimes inserts itself into historical time when ... the living themselves, become aware of an interval in time which is altogether determined by *things that are no longer and by things that are not yet*.”<sup>34</sup> So although Arendt doesn’t mention the present explicitly, these intervals and in-between moments of thought and awareness are exactly the materials of the present, especially when it is not treated as a “memorial-room” for the past or a “waiting room” for the future.

#### CONCLUSION

Finally, I want to briefly address the practicability of **education for the present**. Can it be done at all, or is this way of thinking destined for the same sad fate as that of Benjamin’s program? Although educating without the future in mind indeed looks hard, puzzling, and self-contradicting, there are some educational initiatives that suggest otherwise.

An enlightening example is the use of storytelling by the renowned early childhood teacher Vivian Paley. In Paley’s classroom, the curriculum contains nothing but the individual and collective creation of stories, their being read-aloud by the teacher, and their enactment by the children. One day, Paley tells us, some of the kids avoided the required clean-up that followed play. To deal with the problem, the other children decided to set an imaginary trapdoor that would “enforce” participation in the chore. Although the solution worked fine, Paley’s assistants were worried that the problem would persist. This was her answer: “It may be a mock solution, a one-day wonder, but one day is a whole world, and tomorrow there will be a new story.”<sup>35</sup> This may sound at first like a cliché, yet educators rarely adopt this approach. When the ordinary teacher looks for tangible learning outcomes, continuity, and eventually progress, what is important for Paley is not order, habits, or acquiring certain skills, but the wonder that can be extracted from the present. Since tomorrow is a new story anyway, all attention must be given to the “here and now.”

She also refuses to interpret the children’s behavior using concepts that are external to the story. Paley doesn’t see the student’s gesture as expressing any mental deficit or disorder, or as representing a “social issue,” e.g. belonging to a particular racial or ethnic minority group. The only thing that matters in her classroom is the story as it is actually told and performed *today*. There, and only there, is where the uniqueness of each child, and the complexity of their relationships, can truly appear.

And what about tomorrow? As Paley says, tomorrow there will be another story - one that is free from social and psychological labels; one that is unrestricted by plans, standards, and deferrals. Now, I think we can tell a similar story about education itself, or even about philosophy of education. This could be a pretty good story.



1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968).
2. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 27.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 49.
5. Ibid.
6. Presenting exactly the realization of equality in the present is beyond the scope of this article. Briefly, Rancière suggests that equality should be realized through its presupposition, and much of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, as well as some of his other works, is dedicated to this idea of *equality of intelligences*. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991 [1987])
7. Ibid., 119.
8. Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström, "A Manifesto for Education," *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 5 (2011): 540-547.
9. Ibid., 541.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 49.
13. John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *School Journal* 54 (1897): 78.
14. Ibid.
15. And they add: "This can either be adaptation to the 'what is' of society, in which case education becomes socialization. Or it can be adaptation to the 'what is' of the individual child or student, thus starting from such 'facts' as the gifted child, the child with ADHD, the student with learning difficulties, and so on. In both cases education loses its interest in freedom." Biesta and Säfström, "Manifesto," 541.
16. Ibid., (emphasis added).
17. Walter Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930*, eds Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 201-206.
18. Gerhard Fischer, "Benjamin's Utopia of Education as Theatrum Mundi et Vitae: On the Programme of a Proletarian Children's Theatre," in *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason: Approaches to Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1996), 202.
19. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 277- 300.
20. Ibid., 278-9.
21. Ibid., 287.
22. Ibid., 298.
23. Benjamin, "Children's Theater," 201-202.
24. Ibid., 203.
25. Ibid. On the futility of moral education conducted by the teacher also see: Walter Benjamin, "Moral Education," in *Early Writings, 1910-1917*, ed. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.)
26. Benjamin, "Children's Theater," 204.
27. Ibid., 203.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 204, 202 (emphasis added).
31. Ibid., 206 (emphasis added).



32. Ibid.

33. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 263.

34. Arendt, "Preface," in *Between Past and Future*, 9 (emphasis added).

35. Vivian Paley, *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 46.