What about the children? Benjamin and Arendt: on education, work, and the political

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“What about the children? Benjamin and Arendt: on education, work, and the political”
by Jules Simon

Although not professional educators, Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt provide us with much
to think about in how to educate children to want to be able to become more critically and thus
fruitfully engaged in the political arena. The following consists of reflections upon their ideas
about the nexus of education, work, and politics from Benjamin’s essay, “Program for a
Proletarian Children’s Theater,” and Arendt’s essay, “The Crisis in Education.”

Walter Benjamin: “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater”

Walter Benjamin’s characteristic style of interweaving an analysis of cultural phenomena with
political signifiers is clearly at work in his “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” from
1929, structured by his judgments about the political support or suppression of children’s theater
and its educational possibilities. He notes that in the early institutionalizing stages of the
proletarian movement that swept through Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century, the
early generation of the workers’ movement became mired in their own forms of reified
arguments resulting from establishing their political protocols. This led to alienating children
from their own class by creating an educational abyss between adults and children based on the
consequences of relying on the political language of the self-confident victors:

> Every proletarian movement whenever it has for once escaped the format of
> parliamentary debate, finds itself confronting many different forces for which it is
> unprepared. The most powerful of these, as well as the most dangerous, is the
> younger generation. The self-confidence of parliamentary tedium springs from the
> fact that a parliament is a monopoly of adults. Mere catchphrases have no power
> over children. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 204)

What constitutes the sort of language that characterizes adult debate, even in what should be the
humility of a self-conscious proletarian movement seeking to establish their own educational
foundations, is their tiring adherence to methodology and ideology for the sake of promoting an
attitude of self-confidence. But this is merely a sign of giving in to the laziness and muddling
approach of bourgeois adults versus the inherent self-confidence of children and their natural
propensity to work to their capacity with ‘childlike’ ingenuity. Benjamin (1999) notes that
“Everywhere—and the realm of education is no exception here—the preoccupation with
“methodology” is a symptom of the authentic bourgeois attitude, the ideology of laziness and
muddling through.” (p. 202)

Benjamin (1999) further contends that the framework of proletarian education from the
fourth to the fourteenth years should be the proletarian children’s theater because,

> The education of a child requires that its entire life be engaged. Proletarian
> education requires that the child be educated within a clearly defined space. This
> is the positive dialectic of the problem. It is only in the theater that the whole of
> life can appear as a defined space, framed in all its plenitude; and this is why
> proletarian children’s theater is the dialectical site of education. (p. 202)

Benjamin intimates that this sort of education is suppressed by the bourgeoisie because of their
tacit intention to circumscribe the cultural awareness of children with the result that their early
formative experiences leave them unprepared later in life for critical engagement in the public
political arena.
Indeed, since securing future profits for the promoters of bourgeois theater is the primary motive, the theater presents the greatest possible danger to the more or less fixed world of adult economic and cultural structures:

...nothing presents a greater danger to children than the theater...[because of]...the fear that the theater will unleash in children the most powerful energies of the future. And this fear causes bourgeois education theory to anathematize the theater. We may easily imagine how it would react once the fire came too close—the fire in which, for children reality and play coincide and are fused so that acted sufferings can merge with real sufferings, acted beatings can shade into real beatings. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 202)

If the formative education of children is such that they are not allowed to experience the fullness of life in the defined way provided by theater, they are prohibited from the sort of critical engagement that provides possible scenarios for identifying the actuality of suffering. This means that children trained by bourgeois-sanctioned institutions become ill equipped for identifying and then acting upon such perceptions as the suffering of others, or even their own suffering. In order to learn about suffering, children must learn how to become critically engaged in their environment.

The ground for cultivating possible future critical engagement in the political process by children could happen in that type of theater envisioned by Benjamin, namely, a type of theater as a sort of educational environment that would provide for both experiencing possible completions and interruptions of those very completions. Such “...performances [would] come about incidentally, as an oversight, almost as a children’s prank, and in this way children interrupt the course of study that they have never actually completed.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 203)

The importance of cultivating these two dimensions in children has to do with the fact that our lives consist of many completions (and incompletions), on the one hand, while on the other hand, the desirability of promoting the kinds of spontaneous interruptions of the set patterns that lead to fragmenting the completions with which we discipline our children leads to fostering the possible future ability to at least be prepared to critically interrupt the dominating effects of fascist and totalitarian structures. This is also one of the primary motivations determining not only Arendt’s philosophy of education but also most of her political philosophy.

For Benjamin, this key conceptual ‘structure’ of interruption results in cultivating a respect for the power of indirect influence, since the implementation of direct control is always an easily read sign that the implements of ideological power are in play. He comments, “There is no direct influence either. (And it is on this that directing in the bourgeois theater is based). What counts is simply and solely the indirect influence of the director on the children as mediated by subject matter, tasks, and performances.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 203) By withholding direct control, by intervening with a light touch, so to speak, children are encouraged to explore and extend and engage with their environments. With such a withholding and the application of a light touch, children would in fact be better able to develop a sense of moral authority because adults would not be able to adopt a superior standpoint vis a vis their relationships with children—or with each other. The key is in how the powers of observation are developed:

The neutralization of the “moral personality” in the leader unleashes vast energies for the true genius of education—namely, the power of observation. This alone is the heart of unsentimental love. No pedagogic love is worth anything unless in nine-tenths of all instances of knowing better and wanting better it is deprived of its courage and pleasure by the mere observation of children’s lives.... For the true
observer, however—and this is the starting point of education—every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal. Not so much a signal of the unconscious, of latent processes, repressions, or censorship…but a signal from another work, in which the child lives and commands the new knowledge of children…[that inhabits]…his world like a dictator. For this reason, the “theory of signals” is no mere figure of speech. Almost every childlike gesture is a command and a signal in a world which only a few unusually perceptive men…have glimpsed. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 203)

A Benjaminian would thus demand that educational leaders become better sign readers in order “to release children’s signals from the hazardous magical world of sheer fantasy and apply them to materials.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 204) Such a release from the hazards of sheer fantasy to engagement with the actual material of this world can only happen, however, by way of theatrical workshops that are able to take up and develop the gestures of children in their inimicable propensity for bringing into correspondences their creative and receptive energies by way of improvisation:

What characterizes every child’s gesture is that creative innervation is exactly proportioned to receptive innervation. The development of these gestures in the different forms of expression—the making of stage props, painting, recitation, music, dance, or improvisation—is the task of the different workshops…..In all of them improvisation is central, because in the final analysis a performance is nothing but an improvised synthesis of all of them. Improvisation predominates; it is the framework from which the signals, the signifying gestures, emerge. And the synthesis of these gestures must become performance or theater, because they alone have the unexpected uniqueness that enables the child’s gesture to stand in its own authentic space. The kind of “fully rounded” performance that people torment children to produce can never compete in authenticity with improvisation. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 204)

Benjamin brings our attention back to the formalized cultural neglect of the unique and varied talents of children—especially as that occurs in bourgeois forms of education—by proposing we adopt a program for children’s theater to at least supplement what he knew of contemporary forms of bourgeois education. The loss of cultural exposure in the regimented forms of bourgeois education result in disciplining children to eventually become productive and non-creative, and thus uncritical members of their predominantly Western consumer and commodity oriented societies. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 204) The inherent possibilities of the controlled but openly performative context of the theater, argues Benjamin (1999), allows for, “… in the case of a child … the genius of variation to [reach] a peak of perfection. In relation to the process of schooling, the performance is like the radical unleashing of play—something which the adult can only wonder at.” (p. 205)

For Benjamin, the problem with bourgeois education practice is its attempt to activate energies in a directly political way, thereby draining the enthusiasm of the youth. It does so by directly implementing the ideological convictions of its bourgeois proponents into what should be a forum insulated as much as possible from political intervention, namely, the children’s realm of dreams and fantasies with its nascent but growing sense for the significance of material reality. A child’s education should be a time for, and take place in a space for developing the ability to critically reflect on the demands and praxes of various ideologies that will confront them as they become adults. Indeed, Benjamin argues that not even the proletariat should pass on
its class interest to the next generation by way of subjugating an impressionable child’s mind. That the bourgeoisie does so was, and is, simply a tragedy for children. As Benjamin (1999) notes, “The discipline the bourgeoisie demands from children is its mark of shame.” (p. 205) By contrast, “The proletariat disciplines only the proletarians who have grown up; its ideological class education starts with puberty.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 205) This is a time when the politics of work and sexual dynamics has already become a matter of implementation rather than play and fantasy and improvisation. In choosing that moment in the growth of children for its battleground, proletarian theorists thereby guarantee the fulfillment of their childhood to children by rejecting that children become the domain of class struggle and thus reject the instrumental dominance of children. In other words, the proletarian rejects the disguises of class indoctrination cloaked in educational reform—such as more and constant standardized testing—that the bourgeoisie uses to influence and induct children into its insidious program, namely, to eliminate any possible children’s theater, any possibility of future critique.

Why theater? Why play? Because it is only the phenomenon of unrehearsed performance that provides for the possibility of creative, that is, critical pause. In 1929, Benjamin was still concerned about the course of education, still concerned about how to transform the materiality of our socio-political relations in the context of his (our!) given institutional structures. What a benjaminian advocate of integrating theater into early childhood education realizes is that “New forces, new innervations appear—ones that the director had no inkling of while working on the project. He learns about them only in the course of this wild liberation of the child’s imagination.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 205) Wild liberation? Is that not the most basic form for the language of revolution? And it is precisely in the depths of transforming the culture of educating children before their having become infected with this or that ideology that the critical attitude necessary for liberation and revolution is possible. What is possible with children in the theater and not with adults is that, “Through play their childhood has been fulfilled. They carry no superfluous baggage around with them, in the form of overemotional childhood memories that might prevent them later on from taking action in an unsentimental way.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 205) No childhood memories? What about Benjamin’s Proustian madeleine? No matter. “What is truly revolutionary is the secret signal of what is to come that speaks from the gesture of the child.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 206) But how are we to even read that gesture as adults if we are so culturally conditioned by accepting our collectively sanctioned and mandated political policies that we can no longer take action?

**Hannah Arendt: “The Crisis in Education”**

Arguably, the theme of engendering critical, thoughtful ‘action’ that works against the sort of “collectively sanctioned and mandated political policies” that characterize totalitarian dictatorships, is one way to begin reflecting on Arendt’s philosophy of education. The importance of engendering liberatory forces in children most likely became significant for Arendt because of her hard-earned insight that not tending to the policies and practices of educating our children leads to their becoming more readily susceptible to the dynamics of the modern phenomenon of the mass society, easily manipulated and swayed by this or that ideologue, by this or that educational consumer trend, by this or that commodifying business model, by this or that variation on authoritarian totalizing forms of government. Not incidentally, these are some of the very themes that form the core of Freire’s work, *Pedagogy of the*
Oppressed. But unlike Freire, Arendt takes a decidedly different approach in calling for a transformation of the teacher-student relationship.

Arendt’s essay, “The Crisis in Education,” was written on the occasion of a return to Germany upon being invited to lecture in Bremen.¹ (Arendt, 1993) One key position that aligns Arendt with Benjamin is in how she voices her opposition to Rousseau’s philosophy of education, that is, that it is not only acceptable but preferable that we use education as an instrument of politics. She observes that we should become more attuned to the real purpose for political intervention in educational institutions. That purpose is fueled by the employment of the rhetoric of revolution for the sake of monopolizing revolutionary movements in a tyrannical cast of dictatorial intervention, namely, that the state’s agenda in taking children away from their families and parents is based on their implicit or explicit strategies of indoctrination. Historically, the issue of indoctrination and coercion has been a central concern for philosophies of education from at least the time of Plato’s Republic. In that work, as in many other similar forms of political utopias, a pretense of idealized education is presented when the real issue is political indoctrination through the use of coercion without the obvious use of force. This is clear from Plato’s stipulation that all adults should be banished from the city as an integral premise for securing the unimpeded access to manipulate the development and curriculum of the children. In other words, she addresses in as strong terms as Benjamin the political role that education plays in forming members of a critical political body.

But she steers us on a very different course, drawing on her own experience as an immigrant, politically exiled from her homeland--Germany, to refuge and ultimately naturalization in the United States. She explores “the political role that education actually plays in a land of immigrants” by observing how educational policies in America were directed not only to Americanize the children, but to Americanize the parents as well. (Arendt, 1993, p. 171) Such Americanization took the form of educating immigrants to shed an old world in favor of a new one. Moreover, that same Americanization grew into an educational policy that encourages promoting the illusion that a new world is being built, more specifically, a new world order is being built. But the fact is that children are born into a very old world, even and especially in America. It is old because it is a pre-existing world, constructed by the living and the dead, and it is not only for those who have newly entered it by immigration…. But here illusion is stronger than reality because it springs directly from a basic American experience, the experience that a new order can be founded, and what is more, founded with full consciousness of a historical continuum, for the phrase “New World” gains its meaning from the Old World, which, however admirable on other scores, was rejected because it could find no solution for poverty and oppression. (Arendt, 1993, p. 177)

For Arendt (1993), the reason that Johnny can’t read is because:

nowhere have the education problems of a mass society become so acute, and nowhere else have the most modern theories in the realm of pedagogy been so uncritically and slavishly accepted. Thus the crisis in American education, on the one hand, announces the bankruptcy of progressive education and, on the other, presents a problem of immense difficulty because it has arisen under the conditions and in response to the demands of a mass society. (p. 179)

Taking on the challenge of the rhetoric of progressive theorists, she argues that the problem of equality entailed that, for Americans, the right to an education became an inalienable right, expressed in terms of equality of opportunity and eventually led to instituting policies of mandatory education. For Arendt, mandatory education inexorably leads to the phenomenon of extending primary school until well into secondary school, putting off demanding intellectual preparation until college. Putting off demanding intellectual challenges means that college curricula and professorial talent suffers from chronic overload, affecting the quality of work. The institution of mandatory examinations, or lack thereof, resulted in the growing preponderance of various sorts of meritocracies and oligarchies of talent, of various forms of aristocratic elitism.

But for Arendt the real problem was the abandonment of the child by adults to the tyranny of the authority of the group. This occurs when adults-as-teachers do not account for the individual child, favoring only the group. Faced with the pressure to prioritize the group over the individual, an individual child is less likely to rebel or to cultivate abilities to be able to work on her own and under her own authority. Banished from the world of adults, the child becomes conditioned to being subjected to the tyranny of the majority. Because they are children they can neither reason nor rebel, nor flee to another world since the adult world has been barred to them.

The second problem is the separation of pedagogy from the material that is taught, training teachers to teach in general versus teaching them to master this or that subject matter that has to do with understanding how the world works. Teachers, especially high school teachers, are not masters of their subject matter, leaving students to their own resources because they can not depend on a teacher’s authority, who necessarily becomes authoritarian rather than authoritative because she is not an authority in any subject matter.

The third problem identified by Arendt is an over-reliance on pragmatism in training in pedagogy, i.e., one can only teach what one has experienced, substituting doing-as-performance for learning. The problem with on over-reliance on pragmatic approaches to pedagogy leads to subjecting art and philosophy to the categories of utility and calculation, resulting in the lack of cultivating the kind of freedom needed to be able to distance oneself from one’s immediate environment and thus develop a critical stance. Without such cultivation in critical distance, one is unable to appreciate or love beauty as a viable and significant human phenomenon.

The choice to rely on pragmatism in American education results from a renewed decision not to pass on “dead knowledge” but to “constantly demonstrate how it is produced….” (Arendt, 1993, p. 182), that is, it was a decision “not to teach knowledge but to inculcate a skill.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 183) Of course, Arendt keenly discerned that this direction in American education was a curriculum problem that at its most fundamental basis was, and still is, based on teaching students vocations and not ‘content.’ In other words, it was based on a decision not to teach what the world is like but to get the most out of exploiting the world.

The decision to favor play and cultivate skills was based on what seemed like a good choice to favor a child’s natural liveliness and spontaneity and ‘playful initiative.’ This was set against what seemed to be the more conservative choice to continue to cultivate teaching a received body of knowledge and traditions that appeared to fix students in dispositions of
passivity. For Arendt, substituting doing for learning and playing for working directly illustrates the development of the ‘new’ form of teaching languages, namely, teaching by speaking and not by learning syntax and grammar. Teaching by speaking keeps a child in the “uninterrupted continuity of simple existence” i.e., keeps children as infantile as possible which never lets them ever become critical, ultimately consigning them to the class of ‘jobbers’ who will never rise to the level of workers—those who produce durable goods and art, or actors—those who freely and responsibly speak, act, and guide others in the array of public forums that constitute a polis. In short, “the gradually acquired habit of work and of not-playing, is done away with in favor of [promoting] the autonomy of the world of the child.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 183) The consequence is that children are inadequately prepared to enter into, much less transform, the world of adults.

The philosophy of natality

The most distinctive aspect of Arendt’s philosophy of education, and that which links her thoughts most strongly to Benjamin’s argument for providing independent space and an a-ideological process for children to learn their own gestures, is Arendt’s concept of natality. She claims that “…education belongs among the most elementary and necessary activities of human society, which never remains as it is but continuously renews itself through birth, through the arrival of new human beings.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 185) This entails that children-as-students are newcomers who are not born into the world as finished products that merely need to be sorted out in a Platonic version of testing and categorizing but are, rather, in a state of becoming. As the subject of education, the child has a double aspect: he is in a state of becoming, like all animals, but is just as much “new in a world that is strange to him.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 185) She is not merely “…a new human being … [but she] … is becoming a human being.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 185) What Arendt means is that the child is born into the world and must be trained in those skills that are conduite to her survival like any other animal or organic being. But unlike other species, the child is born into a world that was there before her and will continue long after her death. It is that world in which she will spend her life engaged in activities that have less to do with survival than with the sort of working and acting that is, essentially, useless for sustenance and survival. Although useless, that sort of working and acting contributes to the world in such a way that makes the struggles and joys of carrying on in the world worthwhile at all.

If only the former matters, then training in the means of securing sustenance and skills is the extent of what children should learn. But if the latter matters, then education of the sort that Arendt has in mind should be promoted. And that kind of education entails that parents and educators are jointly responsible to ‘educate’ children not only in life but to continue the world: a child needs protection from the world that is already there and which devours the new but the world also needs protection from that which is new and which constantly threatens its traditional orders, challenges its homogenizing and individualizing hegemonies. Namely, the world needs protection from the ever-new and inventive and industrious child.

From the very beginning, the place for the child is in the privacy of the protective four walls of the family, protected from the public and within a secure place without which one can not survive. But beyond merely surviving, the privacy of the home is where children find the support and individualized attention to cultivate their unique ability to work and to first be helped to form things in the world by the work of their own hands. This way of preparing for the unique contributions that ever-new children make to our common world can, at the minimum, find resonance with Benjamin’s proposal for providing a space for children to develop their own, irreplaceable energies in a Proletarian Children’s Theater.
With regard to developing a child’s own uniqueness, Arendt (1993) points out that everything that lives begins in darkness and “needs the security of darkness to grow at all.” (p. 186) Anecdotally, the loss of such privacy (such enclosed and protected darkness of the privacy of the home) could explain why children of famous parents generally turn out badly because when the public intrudes into the four walls of the privacy of the home they lose the security of their privacy, a security they need in which to grow and develop their talents at their own pace. With ideological or entertainment intrusions, children are forced to expose themselves in a public light in a stage of incompleteness, thus potentially retarding their growth and ability to eventually form independent, critical judgments. In other words, 

The more completely modern society discards the distinction between what is private and what is pubic, between what can thrive only in concealment and what needs to be shown to all in the full light of the public world, the more, that is, it introduces between the private and the public a social sphere in which the private is made public and vice versa, the harder it makes things for its children, who by nature require the security of concealment in order to mature undisturbed. (Arendt, 1993, p. 188)

Arendt understands school as that sort of institution that we impose on children that makes the transition from the privacy of home and family to the public world possible, by introducing that world to children. The task is not to assume responsibility for caring for the vital welfare of this living thing, as for any animal, but rather the task of education is to take concern for “the free development of characteristic qualities and talents…..[which]….is the uniqueness that distinguishes every human being from every other, the quality by virtue of which he is not only a stranger in the world but something that has never been here before.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 189) The educator should stand in relation to the world in a representational disposition of responsibility, even if she did not make it, in order to introduce a child to gradually take responsibility for the world. Arendt strongly condemns those adults and educators who do not appreciate the gravity of this task: “Anyone who refuses to assume joint responsibility for the world should not have children and must not be allowed to take part in educating them.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 189)

In education, this responsibility takes the particular form of assuming authority but not simply the authority of knowing this or that empirical body of knowledge (which is merely a minimum prerequisite for even entering the classroom). Rather, while qualification has to do with knowing the world, authority rests on the assumption of responsibility for that world. As an authority, the educator assumes the role of representative of all adults and, in pointing out the details of what constitutes the world and how it works, which also says: “this is our world.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 189) Authority always has to do with assuming joint responsibility for not only knowing and understanding how the world works but for the course of the world, which entails not only learning how to give orders but also learning how to obey them. Her critique of modern pedagogical initiatives means: “Children cannot throw off educational authority, as though they were in a position of oppression by an adult majority—though even this absurdity of treating children as an oppressed minority in need of liberation has actually been tried out in modern education practice.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 189) Arendt (1993) contends that “Authority has been discarded by adults, and this can mean only one thing: that the adults refuse to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought the children.” (p. 190) The abrogating of authority teaches generations of children to abrogate assuming responsibility for the world.

Even more potentially dangerous, by abrogating assumption of authority and abandoning teaching responsibility for the course of the world, educators also stand in position to either
weaken or strengthen the ‘divided connection’ of the public-political and private-family, and - educational realms. The ‘divided-connection’ has to do with the line that exists between the private and public realms and the role that educators and adults play in either ‘maintaining’ the sharp distinction between those realms, for the sake of the healthful and holistic and gradual development of the child, or of allowing that borderline to be violated. The complication is that the greater the loss of trust in authority in the public sphere, the greater the violation of the private sphere, which places an even greater burden on sorting out what the demands of acting with authority in public life entails.

Arendt rejects the long tradition, stemming from Plato and Aristotle, of modeling political authority on the authority of parents over children and educators over pupils. She rejects that it is based on instituting an absolute authority over relatively powerless others which, for the sake of human dignity, should never be allowed to occur. Reinscribing the license for instituting such ‘authoritarian’ teaching and parenting relationships inevitably leads forms of totalitarian political life Arendt so vigorously opposed. If such ‘imperial’ authority were allowed to occur it would have to incorporate the sort of temporary superiority found in the nursery, which is not the permanence of the superiority of ruler over ruled. Instead, authority should take the form of the teaching of joint responsibility. In short, the loss of authority as the abrogation of responsibility is a consequence of the modern condition of estrangement from the world that results from the radical and desperate situation of becoming members of a mass society.

By its very nature, education is a conservative process but in the best sense of the root etymology of the word, namely, that it is the work of conservation. The essence of education is to cherish and preserve children, “to protect the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 192) This sort of conservation only translates to the political realm when we act with and among other adults and peers as if that were the only realm of action. Such acts conserve the status quo and lead to destructive and ruinous support for totalitarianisms. They lead in this direction because just to conserve the status quo conditions children-who-become-adults to not intervene in the world, that is, to abrogate the possibility to be able to create something new. The world, “created by mortal hands to serve mortals for a limited time as home,” constantly changes and wears out and thus must be preserved from the risk of becoming merely mortal. Thus, “it must be constantly set right anew.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 192)

Arendt has been criticized, however, for maintaining that such a ‘setting right anew’ must necessarily be understood as a conservative task. Indeed, she argues that:

The problem is simply to educate in such a way that a setting-right remains actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured. Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look. Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world….”

(Arendt, 1993, p.195)

In fact, on her terms, the modern crisis of authority in education is linked to a crisis in tradition, that is, a loss of respect for the past. This makes negotiating what and how to teach history and cultural traditions an especially difficult and challenging task for an educator, since her task is precisely to mediate between the present and the past with a mastery of knowledge and ethical sensitivity. Unfortunately, what is more often the case is that modern forms of pedagogy are
employed that have no respect for the sort of guiding examples that the past provides; they provide no respect for the wisdom of old age. To make her point, she draws on the Roman tradition of veneration of old age within our midst since for the Romans only in growing old and beginning the process of disappearing does one begin to assume authority. The Greeks, by contrast, identified being with appearance and thus the cult of the transience of beauty was born and distrust for the world and our dialogue with others began. Fundamentally, however, it was a distrust of others based on the possible loss of the beauty of the image that resulted in the turn away from a respect for the wisdom of old age.

In the best of our possible worlds, education should consist of providing a standard by which to measure one’s progress in growth, in the sense that one is worthy of one’s ancestors, worthy to engage in contestations with them and with their problems. The demand is that you are worthy of carrying on the work that was begun in their name. That does not mean that Arendt thinks that there is nothing new under the sun. It merely means that she takes a hard, sober view of the process of modern estrangement from the world that has produced our mass society, our mass culture, our mass entertainment, our political apathy, and our willing involvement in the destruction of our natural environments. But this is not an automatic process that is irreversible; rather, it can be interrupted, arrested, and set aright.

Her solution? “We must decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life…” (Arendt, 1993, p. 195) in order to apply a concept of authority to it that is not generally valid in the world of adults. In practice, this means at first that there should “be a clear understanding that the function of the school is to teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living.” (Arendt, 1993, p. 195) Second, the line between children and adults must be clearly recognized but not definitively drawn, since that would lead children into believing that they could develop into some kind of autonomous state unto themselves, with a law unto themselves and with no responsibility for the world. Indeed, education, as opposed to learning, has to be understood as having a definitive goal, namely, graduation from a university or a technical school, and not high school, because the latter is limited to introducing young people to the world as a whole, while the former is concerned with professionalization and thus specialization and therefore is concerned with only a limited segment of the world.

Moreover, and third, we can not turn over the task of education to professional pedagogues who have created many of the current problems in the first place. Indeed, a healthy orientation toward the “science of pedagogy” should present:

…the relation between grown-ups and children in general or, putting it in even more general and exact terms: our attitude toward the fact of natality: the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth. (Arendt, 1993, p.196)

This is Arendt’s conclusion, which is in fact not as far from Benjamin’s as it seems. Benjamin contends, as well, that the education of children needs to be divorced from the ideological manipulations of the political realm in order for children to develop their own unique ways of at all being able to become critical of the political realm as adults. Indeed, Benjamin and Arendt are not that far from each other in setting out what one of the more important, but eventual goals of educating children should be, namely, cultivating their powers to become creatively critical of the political realm into which they are born and which will determine the course of their lives and the lives of their own unborn children. The differences between these two philosophers
is that for Benjamin education is set in the context of the workers’ movement. In that case, we need to be sure that our children will be able to freely play (within the bounded context of the ‘stage’ of work) in order for them to become aware of their own creative, critical possibilities and thus form their own identities. For Arendt (1993), education is not about setting children free to play, but more about setting them in the context of the world itself, the one world that we share and that calls for renewal: “…education…is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.” (p. 196) For both Benjamin and Arendt, the task of education ultimately has to do with whether we trust our children enough to help them to assume creative, critical responsibility for our failures.

References