

How can we teach young students to resist the State and market? Can we?

A discussion paper on Janis Talivaldis Ozlins' keynote speech entitled "Creating the Civil Society East, and West: Relationality, Responsibility and the Education of the Humane Person, a PESA 2013 keynote speech"

Duck-Joo Kwak (Seoul National University)

The speaker's talk seems to be a poignant critique of the common school practice today which has been driven by the 'measurement' of academic achievement as its top priority forced by the governments. The speaker proposes one of our way-outs is to refocus our school practice on civil education worthy of its name. This talk *rightly* reminds us educators of the purposes of education per se, which have been unjustly overlooked in the midst of seemingly more urgent demands upon the public school by the ever-globalizing world of post-industrial society.

While agreeing with the speaker's general points in his argument, I want to make an issue about my suspicion that the anti-foundational orientation in the contemporary discourse in education field may have indirectly contributed to the sharp rise of measurement culture in school practice. By acknowledging and even celebrating the fundamental disagreement over educational purposes from culture to culture, and even from person to person, we end up leaving much room for the technicality of measurement to take over as the only norm objectively acceptable in school practice. It is commonly acknowledged among philosophers of education these days there is no such a thing as the educational purpose any desirable educational practice is *universally* supposed to pursue, like 'the good personhood' or 'individual autonomy'; there is no metaphysical or philosophical ground for it. Thus, we philosophers of education tend to deliberately *deflect* the discourse on educational purposes (as meta-narrative or grand-narrative), and at best to localize it in terms of the context of specific teachings concerned. Even when we dare to attempt to do so, the very way of addressing it often tends to be highly self-reflective and intellectually subtle, it hardly touches the heart of practically minded teachers and general public. This means, while rightly dismissing grand narratives on the purpose of education, we philosophers of education have failed to make our concerned voice for a *more general*, if not universal, purpose of education heard. In other words, we are in urgent need to find a *new* way of addressing the question on the purpose of education, namely addressing it in the post-metaphysical language translatable to educational practitioners and general public.

Given this background concern of mine, I find the speaker's emphasis on civil education as one of core purposes of school education to be good food for thought. It made me reflect a lot on the reality of educational practice within the public system, the one especially in the Korean contexts. But unfortunately, this reflection has left me with a lot more questions and doubts about the future of

public education. Thus, all I can do here is just to share the questions and doubts with you. The way I do this is by reconstructing the speaker's argument in such a way as to make sense of it in relation to what I think is important to addressing the civil education he talks about. I hope this can be a productive way of conversing with his educational concerns and ideas.

The speaker starts by reviewing the various concepts of 'civil society' as a way of defining what he means by the term. And he ends up concluding the civil society is a society which is in uneasy tension with the State and market. The speaker here seems to make a slight distinction between the State and market in their relation to the civil society. The civil society operates in such a way as to be overlapped and side by side with the State by way of influencing or resisting it. It does so, for example, by being formed into political forces against the State. But this is less the case with the market since "citizens have little influence over the market or financial institutions and corporations that exist outside the reach of the political process" (p. 6). This tendency of the market seems to get stronger in our world of global capitalism, bringing about more serious challenges to public education. And thus, we can finally summarize the speaker's overcall claim as follows: to secure the existence and function of the civil society defined above, we should teach young students to *resist* the State and market.

How can we teach them to resist the State and market, then? The speaker stresses the importance of community-building in education for that. But what sort of community does he have in mind? Here he appears to oscillate between two different senses of community, a newly formed and wider community of *political* association defended by Gramsci, and an old communitarian community of *history* or *tradition* often admired by Charles Taylor in the West and Confucius in the East. We can say both senses of community have their origin in the *romantic* concept of community in which a sense of membership or belonging is considered to be constitutive of one's ideal selfhood. But there is a fundamental tension between these two senses of community, which may imply two different educational purposes and pedagogies, i. e., the emancipated mind of critical pedagogy and the committed loyalty of communitarian pedagogy, respectively. The critical pedagogy would aim to foster future citizens' ability to *be critical* of their given norms, so as to challenge or at least resist the status quo of the social and economic order. In contrast, the communitarian pedagogy would aim to inculcate the given norms of the community upon future citizens as a way of cultivating their *commitment to* and *virtues for* the well-being of the local fellow human beings. Therefore, it is not clear, unless the speaker qualifies otherwise, how a person with faithful commitment to her given norms can be motivated to become 'a *public* citizen' who can go against the State or market for the justice of the wider and inclusive community. The very virtues in her human identity rooted at her local culture do not automatically allow this to happen. For example, it is often claimed that Confucian morality has well accommodated the State-maneuvering rapid economic developments in the contemporary east-Asian countries, due to its key norms such as loyalty to the State and its given

authority.

The speaker's oscillation between two different senses of community for his idea of community-building in education seems to produce another conceptual difficulty when he defines the civil society in terms of "human relationship in the fulfillment of human persons" by claiming that human identity can be developed and revealed in human sociability (p. 7). More confusingly, he also adds that to be fully human is to be responsible for the other, referring to Aristotelian and Confucian ethics (p. 7-9). It is not that I disagree with any of these points he makes here, especially his emphasis on the educational values of the civil society, community, and human relation in the ways they form and influence our human identities. But it is that it is very hard to know what he means by all those terms and how they could be all connected to each other to converge on his pedagogical formulation of civil education. He might just want to say that a solid sense of one's *human* identity shaped by the good and stable human relations in her local community can be a *moral* basis for the building of a wider and more inclusive community of the civil society. Thus, he might continue to say, the human identity shaped by the local culture is to be expanded when its moral basis is inclusive and flexible enough for the building of a just civil society. Then, my further question would be: How would you as educators facilitate this transition for civil education to the extent to lead young students to resist the State and market?

I suspect that the human identity formed by our close relationship with meaningful others in the local community is very much likely to be in tension with our *public* membership in the wider community of civil society. This tension is precisely the price we are forced to pay to live with others from different cultural, political and religious backgrounds in the pluralistic liberal society; it leaves us with inner rupture in our *human* identity. My Confucian humanity cultivated through my family background in the form of a personal virtue has been acutely in tension with my Marxist humanity awakened and developed in my collage years with the concern for the public justice; I often find myself split between the two qualitatively different kinds of humanities in me. This split pushes me to constantly reflect on who I am or what sort of person I wish to be. If this can be the case with most of us living in today's pluralistic world, we can even say that this inner rupture is not necessarily an educational evil but an educational virtue. It could be channeled into an educative moment when a new kind of *human* identity is to be explored and tested if young students are educationally encouraged to live up to the inner rupture. This may show us that the future citizens' *public* membership may have to be newly learned by means of *unlearning* their private/local membership (Kwak, 2010).

On the other hand, is it always educationally legitimate to encourage young students to struggle to live up to the inner rupture in their human identity and to be able to resist the educationally disingenuous and dehumanizing forces from the State and market? As our speaker suggests here and there, school education cannot be exclusively committed to the moral and political mission for civility.

It also has an important role of equipping the future citizens with skills and knowledge for a changing workplace (p. 2), which Gert Biesta calls the function of ‘qualification’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 39). There is another function the school is expected to make: that of *socialization of* young students into a given particular social, cultural, and political orders. Interestingly enough, Biesta describes it as a form of citizenship education (p. 39). Even if our speaker’s civil education is clearly distinct from this process of socialization, he would not deny the school also plays this function. And helpfully enough, Biesta introduces the third function of the school education, that is, ‘processes of subjectification’ or processes of ‘becoming a subject’ (p. 40). Despite our speakers’ conceptual ambiguity, his civil education, at least seen from its educational ambition, certainly best fits this function of school education. In contrast to the socialization function, this is the function that triggers young students to subject themselves to “ways of being that hint at independence from” (p. 40) existing orders they were already socialized into. Thus, it is not wrong to say that our speaker’s civil education would aspire to processes of subjectification, in Biesta’s terms, for its educational purpose

Given this reading of the nature of our speaker’s civil education, he would acknowledge that his civil education will always be in tension with two other functions of school education, which he also admits as important for the preparation of future citizens. This is why our speaker keeps claiming that his proposal is targeted only at *rebalancing*, not integrating, these different yet competing functions of school education. However, I wonder if it is plausible to think that the three different functions of the school education could ever be placed in balance *in principle*. Although school education as a publicly funded institution may be expected to play diverse functions *at the same time* for the society, the three functions seems to be always in competition with each other in the sense that the dominance of one or two functions tends to undermine the other functions. The three functions may represent three different ideas of education inherited from the past for the modern education, each of which would potentially direct our educational practice into a completely different direction. (Each idea may presuppose a fundamentally different set of educational purposes and rationales and therefore would suggest a completely different approach to curriculum-organization and pedagogical prescriptions.)

Kieran Egan is an educational thinker who boldly takes this line of thought in his recent book entitled *The Future of Education* (2008). He claims here that modern schooling as a public system is doomed to fail since it has been established by relying on three potentially incompatible ideas of education, namely socialization, intellectualization (development of academic mind), and individuation; each idea is incomplete in itself to become the exclusive purpose of the modern schooling, so as to be in need of the other two ideas/functions to keep school education as a public system from falling apart. For example, socialization strives to homogenize, and individuation strives to bring out the uniqueness of each person. It is “very hard to aim for both in the same institution and expect success” (Egan, 2008, p. 32). But, according to Egan, we have always tried to conceive some

ways of conceptually integrating these two or three ideals for school education in vain, when in fact, all we could do was to make constant readjustments as makeshifts in response to the unbalance of the three functions. For Egan, this is why school education as a modern public system has been so contentious concerning its role as an educational institute from the beginning of its establishment in the 19th century. This is why teachers and school administrators within the public system have always been confused about the nature of their job as educators.

This line of reflection leads us to see how far our speaker's civil education as processes of 'subjectification' could go and how difficult his project would be in being actualized within the public school system. His civil education is said to aim at enabling young students to resist the State and market. What could this possibly mean in teachers' pedagogical context? It could mean that teachers are to encourage their students to be critical of their existing ways of doing and being, which have been shaped through the processes of 'qualification' and 'socialization' in the same school education. In other words, the tension between the three functions of school education as understood in the pedagogical terms makes us realize how idealistic/unrealistic our speaker's civil education would sound to teachers in school practice.

A parallel account can be given to our speaker's critique of the measurement culture in education today. He seems to give us a very sophisticated criticism on it, but here again he is careful enough not to make a sweeping dismissal of the measurement culture in education. According to the speaker, it has its own place in education; the problem is that it has gone too far and thereby illegitimately colonizes the entire dimensions of education. I think that the measurement as a way of evaluation can be useful in education when it comes to the two functions of the school education mentioned above: qualification and socialization. The two functions are closely associated with the social selections and classifications of future members to provide a support of economic development and political stability for the whole society. Even guarded by the liberalist ideology of social equality, the modern school system has been deemed to be a honorable public machinery as a legitimate channel through which social mobility is allowed for individuals, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds. The current popularity of the measurement culture in education, especially in the East Asian countries, has do to with its pretended success in establishing the *objectivity* of what is measured, rather than its *validity*, which represents the value of fair competition for social mobility. So we cannot easily ignore the instrumental role of the measurement in education since it serves some important social roles, if not educational role.

However, the dominance of the measurement culture in education, no matter how useful it may be for its social functions, cannot avoid undermining the integrity of educational practice in the school since it tends to give future citizens a wrong message, saying education may be all about social mobility, nothing really much to do with seeking something real, good and beautiful. Thus, Egan suggests in his imagery depiction of the school-reform for the 21st century society that there should

be two separate tracks in school education; one track is to be purely devoted to education for socializing and the other for individuation (2008, pp. 172-173). For each track, the measurement of academic achievement/performances is to be differently interpreted and evaluated in accordance with different purposes of education. Even if some people would say Egan's proposal is purely unrealistic, given our current school system, I find the measurement-dominant current education system far more surreal, if not unrealistic, from the educational perspective.

This is why I find exam-obsessed school culture in the East Asian countries deeply worrisome and despairing. The exam-culture in these countries is said to be not completely the result of modernization, but rooted in the Confucian tradition that they all share. It is true that Confucian tradition of education allowed the instrumental view of it in that education was often viewed as an opportunity for social success for the family or country. However, this view was always counteracted by the other view of education within the same tradition, which took 'learning and studying for its own sake' very seriously. Thus, in the educational minds of the East Asians, these two traditional views of education coexisted side by side for a long time. The reason they could co-exist for a long time was that there was high respect among common people for the moral authority of teachers and scholars, regardless of the latter's social and political success.

However, given the triumph of measurement culture in education today, there is not much hope for the recovery of this old tradition or hope for teachers to do their job for the civil society as our speaker expects. The best thing we can hope well-intended teachers to do is for them to keep themselves alert to the question of what educational purpose their teaching practice is to serve from one time to another or from one place to another. This *strategic* approach may be the best way they can accommodate the integrity of their educational practice. This may also be where it becomes important for us philosophers of education to find new ways of addressing the question on the purpose of education, new ways that can appeal to teachers and school administrators to keep alive and refreshed their educational consciousness.

References

- Biesta, Gert (2009), Good Education in an age of Measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose of in education, *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, Vol. 21, pp. 33-46
- Egan, Kieran (2008), *The Future of Education: Re-imagining Our Schools from the Ground Up*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press
- Kwak, Duck-Joo (2010). Teaching to unlearn Community to make a Claim to Community: For the Formation of a Political Subject for the Post-liberal Society, *Educational Theory*, Vo. 60 No. 4, pp. 405-416