

DEAF EDUCATION AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: TOWARD EDUCATIONAL AGENCY

Boaz Ahad Ha'am
independent research center - B.A.H

Disagreements in Deaf educationⁱ mostly revolve around methodological subjects. Methodology is not a trifle issue, as questions on how education is best implemented, resourced and catered to the deaf are universal. Any instruction, especially scientifically aspiring one, must deal with methodology. Empirically inclined it also much easier to sift through and minimize political biases. Such is not, however, the objective of this inquiry. Rather, it is the question of ends.

The question of *what we wish the students be*, is teleological and methodological answers should derive from it. Thus, what the students will be will determine how we teach them. However, it seems that question of ends was turned the tables and is a result of the methodological debate. That is, the students will be how we teach them. Such framing of Deaf education seems like a tail wagging the dog; so where is the head and where are education's ends?

What Deaf education (for)?

It is not easy to deduce what the aims of Deaf education are. One can induce from the texts and probably will gain some understanding from talking to educators themselves. But the texts are not only dumb, they are too often too vague. This might be a good way to devise a political strategy, but is certainly not *educational*.

Or so it seems to the author: some texts define the aims as vague as educational objectives,ⁱⁱ or more particularly as creative problem-solving,ⁱⁱⁱ achieving understanding or sharing of meaning.^{iv} Perhaps the aims of students developing their “best abilities”^v is better than calling for the preparation of deaf children to the world they live in.^{vi} Yet others aim at solutions for general and particular challenges,^{vii} or working toward the students flexibly dealing with reality.^{viii} Maybe political aims such as self-determination,^{ix} or achieving the status of a “contributing” citizen convince.^x Then are those who assert the aims of language, from those fixed on language exigencies,^{xi} through those promising communicational development,^{xii} to those hoping for a “well educated bi-lingual” students.^{xiii} Most of these aims hold a latent aim - or rather, manifest to the point of not needing it to be mentioned - of “integration into the hearing world.”^{xiv} Finally and the least are those who have no goal or ends.^{xv}

Without giving consideration to the aims of Deaf education, it seems a that the discourse and practice on and of Deaf education does not start right.

Political Philosophy and Education

Starting with the fundamental questions the philosophy of education poses is a good start, but too broad.^{xvi} Too broad since the answers deal with the essence of education and not the educated. That is why this paper argues for political philosophy to intersperse. Political philosophy might start earlier, or rather, much later^{xvii} but it centers at the subject. The object of education and the hub of human consciousness: the person. “What is the nature of man?” is a fundamental question in political philosophy and that is where this paper argues, Deaf education should start, especially since it has obviated the question of Deaf education's aims, in general.

Limiting this paper to a particular objective, requires a compromise on the length dedicated to the philosophical discussion on the definitions of a what a person is, along with the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of the phenomenon of being. Hence, succinctly the first presumption of being a person is that humans are *agents*; that is, an active person or a person that has the capacity to act. It is a presumption because we not only describe what we are, we also prescribe it. Some of us are non-agents; either physically or culturally. Those who are in coma or dead are physically non-agents, though negating their personhood is not easily done as both mercy killing and necrophilia are both almost universally disallowed.^{xviii} Women, slaves, children and animals were ruled non-agents in various episodes of history, and are the cultural examples. Hence, agency is a presumption that conditions anything human, excepting form.^{xix}

Agency and Deafness

Defining agency, it is composed of two properties: *decision-making* and *experience*.^{xx} Where experience provides for the unique makeup every person possess, such as a physical makeup, sex, class, age, nationality, gender and so on, decision-making is a two-tier property. The first tier is the ability to decide between different alternatives; the second is being able to execute the decision made on the earlier alternatives.

The two-tier category distinction is essential, since agency can't be complete without the two interacting. That is, unable to determine between choices, shrinks one's agency to a diminutive one. This is applicable in all areas: not knowing which mortgage to take or distinguishing between poisonous and nonpoisonous mushrooms. Proper agency is dependent on the first tier, but the second one is invaluable. For being able to make a choice does not render one capable of practicing it. Preferring a Ferrari over Fiat is only half of the equation as being able to actually finance a Fiat and not a Ferrari is where agency is capped by practical limitations. Being able to distinguish between choices is then the necessary but insufficient condition, as being able to implement a decision without being able to decide; the two must be congruent, not merely adjunct.

As for the experience, while it is the unique makeup of each individual. Experience can carry no value, and it can hold a negative or positive value toward the decision-making sphere. When it has a bearing over the decision-making category, such as influencing choices and their implementation, the significance of experience is different than merely being the color that gives each of us our idiosyncrasies. For being poor and unable to afford or access sexual protection devices certainly changes one's choices and actions, compared with the one who can afford or has access to condoms and as result is exposed to sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy. So experience can count for much; but it should not substitute the primary sphere and negate agency without relating the decision-making sphere.

That is exactly what political philosophy has provided us with: prioritizing the decision-making sphere over the experience one, in order to free us from the prejudice of mere luck (and moral luck in relation to deafness).^{xxi} That is why concepts such as equality and liberty earned their universal legitimacy – by relegating experience to the primacy of being human (agency).^{xxii} Thus while the example of condoms caters to the general argument of agency, the experience of deafness is the main focal point here.

While not elaborated in detail, another implication of the earlier arguments is that Deaf

education discourse assigns the experience of deafness a higher priority than the primary sphere of agency: decision-making. So while there is denying that experience of deafness at times promotes and at other times hinders one's path toward a bettered agency, it should not be given the pretense of containing all agency or overbearing it to the point that Deaf education's aims are enthralled, entwined and twisted around that experience alone.

For deafness has no direct bearing on the decision-making sphere: deafness does not impair choosing between alternatives, and it does not impair implementation of decisions. In contrast to cognitive disability, which directly impacts the ability to make choices, deafness does not lead to impaired judgment. What directly impairs choosing between alternatives is not the deafness, but the lack of knowledge, ability to analyze and compare, and other features that are affected by inaccessible *experience*. Argument wise, accessible experience can be oral or signed. There is even less reason to view deafness as impairing execution, though it did not stop discriminating against the deaf from driving to flying. Once again, however, in contrast to a physical disability that stymies a person from acting upon a certain decision, deafness does not impair execution, as the clichéd motto saying that deaf people can do anything except hearing proves itself everyday from mundane activities to the Deaflympics.

Deaf education and Agency

It is in this sense of being an agent that education comes to fore. For education is the process through which the properties of decision-making are developed and honed, along the unique experience of every student. Through the various educational processes, students are supposedly developing better discernment of the alternatives they need or can choose from, as well as the capacities to act upon their decisions. This is the place where the two converge, and how, this paper argues, Deaf education should define itself.

If students are defined in terms of their agency, then from an educational ideology perspective the question is what are the ends of education when coming to term with agency? How does education promote decision-making on its two tiers and in consideration of the experience of deafness/HOH?

Choices – what educational methods or processes advance better decision-making? The ability to decide between alternatives should be researched as such. From literacy, through critical reading, to inter-disciplinary knowledge, the cognitive tools that promote the analysis, comparison, deduction and induction and so on.

Actions – what educational methods or processes advance better execution? The practice and training required to implement decisions. The emotional and behavioral tools that permit to successfully execute decisions, such as the classic views of music and sports and toward debating and robotics.

Experience – how is the experience of the students is being promoted toward positively affecting their decision-making? All the more in face of deaf students' heterogeneity, here the issues span the various variables and effects.

From the short points above it can be clear that it is only meant to demonstrate the argument's point, and not present a thorough research on the way curriculum, context, methods and other educational issues should accord. This paper is set on the aims.

Aims of Deaf education

Whether the argument for defining Deaf education in terms of agency is successfully made in this paper, it is the author's hope that the question of aims will be discussed nonetheless. It should no longer remain a shadowed one, especially in Deaf education. Shadowed turned to shady the question of aims leaves Deaf education to the manifest, but more often, latent, interests of the various protagonists whom aims impair, at best, or, at worst, fail the deaf and hard of hearing students' potential or future^{xxiii} agency and with it the very philosophy of education.

Combining Deaf education and political philosophy toward educational agency, the aims of Deaf education are argued to be: *Providing the skills and practice needed for deaf students to become capable agents. Agents who can distinguish between alternatives, implement the decisions they have chosen, and utilize their experience as deaf or hard-of-hearing persons.*

-
- i I use Deaf education capitalized throughout the paper to denote the specialized field as opposed to, say, education of the deaf as non-specialized. Also, the use of the word deaf is meant both deaf and hard-of-hearing, but is kept mostly as “deaf” for sake of brevity only.
 - ii As exemplified by the questions: “How should deaf students communicate? Where should they be taught? What should they be taught?” Moores, D. F. & K. P., Meadow-Orlans, eds., *Educational and Developmental Aspects of Deafness*, Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1990. P. 11.
 - iii ...”the level of potential development which is possible through creative problem-solving under the guidance of a competent other.” While this might lean interpretation toward the development, I take it to be not. For it is the learning process which is the development, but the educational one and the objective is the creative problem-solving. Christensen, Kathee & Gilbert, Delgado, eds., *Deaf Plus: A Multicultural Perspective*, California: DawnSignPress, 2000. P. ix.
 - iv “The primary goal of education is the acquisition of understanding or the making and sharing of meaning in the various disciplines that co-occurs with, supports, and is supported by the acquisition of American Sign Language (ASL) and English.” Livingston, Sue, *Rethinking the Education of Deaf Students: Theory and Practice from a Teacher's Perspective*, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1997. P. xi-xii
 - v ...”their child has a good educational experience and progresses to the full extent of his abilities.” Katz, Lee, S. L., Mathis III, and E. C. Merrill, Jr., *The Deaf Child in the Public Schools: A Handbook for Parents of Deaf Children*, 2nd ed., Illinois: The Interstate Printers & Publishers, Inc., 1978. P. v.
 - vi Plaut, Aviva, *Hearing Impaired Students: Challenges in Education and Teaching*, Kiryat Bialik: ACH Press Inc., 1994. P. 11. In Hebrew.
 - vii Most, Tova & Dalia Ringwald-Frimerman, *Theoretical and applied aspects in rehabilitation and education of deaf and hard of hearing children and adolescents*, Tel-Aviv: Mofet Institute, 2014. P. 9-15. In Hebrew.
 - viii Vaguely stated as “providing students with the knowledge necessary to be flexible in the face of novel situations and new information.” In Marschark, Marc, H. G., Lang, and J. A. Albertini, *Educating Deaf Students: From Research to Practice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. P. 7. The authors also note “success” as an important value, but such concept alone can't be made to convey a meaning without further elaboration, which will delve into the meaning of such concept in light of *areté* or any other intention uncleared in this given work.
 - ix Which is perhaps a vague call: “The dichotomy that exists between hearing people in the profession serving deaf children and many of the Deaf professionals is striking and should be a wake-up call to the profession in general. It appears that the question posed and the point tenured by Deaf professionals is one of self-determination—a self-determination that embraces pride in one's self and one's identity as a Deaf person, that revels in one's culture and language, and that denies dependency and disability. Should we not as hearing professionals also embrace and foster this self-determination on the part of deaf children and train our teachers-to-be accordingly.” King, J. F., ed., *Introduction to Deaf Education: A Deaf Perspective*, Oregon: Butte Publications, Inc., 2001. P. vi-vii.
 - x This is one of my favorites: ...”the beneficent results of the education afforded by our schools in general and by the College. The deaf in America are, with rare exceptions, law-abiding, temperate, industrious, capable, and useful members of society.” Gordon, J. C., *Education of the Deaf: Notes and Observations*, Washington

-
- D.C.: Volta Bureau, 1892. P. ix.
- xi Hence, communication and language were emphasized, as educational goals were “enslaved to achievements in language.” Plaut, Aviva, *What Has Changed? The History of Educational Frameworks for Students with Hearing-Impairments in Israel 1932-2005*, Tel-Aviv: Mofet Institute, 2007. P. 401. In Hebrew.
- xii ...”education is inextricably linked to the development and use of spoken language skills...” or “...linked to signed communication and the language and culture of Deaf communities.” Power, Des & Greg Leigh, *Educating Deaf Students: Global Perspectives*, Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2004. P. xiii.
- xiii Johnson, R. E., S. K., Liddell, and C. J., Ertling, *Unlocking the Curriculum: Principles for Achieving Access in Deaf Education*, Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989. P. 15.
- xiv “The declared superior-purpose of most educational frameworks for students with hearing-impairment is integration in the hearing world.” Plaut, Aviva, *What Has Changed? The History of Educational Frameworks for Students with Hearing-Impairments in Israel 1932-2005*, Tel-Aviv: Mofet Institute, 2007. P. 402. In Hebrew.
- xv Stewart D. A. & T. N. Kluwin, *Teaching Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: Content, Strategies, and Curriculum*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001.
- xvi “What are its [education] aims? What authority does it rest on? What responsibilities does it entail? How, or in what manner, should it be carried out? What should its content be?” Curren, Randall, ed., *Philosophy of Education: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007. P. 3
- xvii As education existed before human awareness of what education is.
- xviii While it is possible to further distinguish into the meaning of non-agency and observe *unagency* with *disagency*. The first noting the reversal of agency, such in the case of the deceased; while *disagency* makes note of the splintered agency in which, say, the paralyzed person unable to interact in any external manner. It serves here no useful purpose to delve into the subtleties of the philosophical meanings of non-agency.
- xix The philosophical argument on what counts being human expands beyond the agency question and revolves many issues that reflect the conviction that being human is a unique condition (if for theological reasons or others). Hence, developing a software that is capable of 'fooling' people conversing with it to think they are talking to another human being, is, for example, a breach into the domain of the 'mind' (or soul as others like it to be named), which is supposedly unique to humans, and so on. Again, this serves little purpose here; mainly because the challenge of Deaf education is not a matter that is dealt with at these spheres of philosophical inquiry. Thus, it is not relevant to discuss if dolphins are humans in conjunction to Deaf education, to name an introductory philosophical dilemma. See, “Is a Dolphin a Person?” in, White, T. I., *Discovering Philosophy*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1996. P. 98-104.
- xx Accorded in works by Taylor and Butler, an easier work to fathom is perhaps, Kim, D., K., *Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. P. 3-21.
- xxi “Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck...” Nagel, Thomas, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. P. 26. In this respect, I meant the moral luck because of the judgment passed on being deaf and choosing Deafness, as opposed to the “general luck” that is constitutive of generally being born well-off, healthy and so on...
- xxii The issue of pluralism and multicultural prioritizing is still a question in debate in political philosophy, as other fundamental questions relating to the relation of the individual and the group, nature of truth, limits of authority, and pursuit of happiness conflict. Like Berlin has noted, it is a fantasy that all ideals should harmonize. “What was common to all these outlooks was the belief that solutions to the central problems existed, that one could discover them, and, with sufficient selfless effort, realise them on earth. They all believed that the essence of human beings was to be able to choose how to live: societies could be transformed in the light of true ideals believed in with enough fervour and dedication.” Berlin, Isaiah, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, 2nd ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013. P. 4.
- xxiii The idea of open (or close) future and its ramification for the deaf or education in general has been argued and reviewed, but is still too broad and lacks the qualities the agency argument possess. See for example, Patrick Kermit, “Cochlear Implants, linguistic rights and 'open future' arguments,” in Kristiansen, Kristjana, Simo Vehams and Tom Shakespeare, eds., *Arguing about Disability: Philosophical perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2009. P. 137-154. And the original work, Joel Feinberg’s “The Child’s Right to an Open Future,” in Curren, Randall, ed., *Philosophy of Education: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007. P. 112-124.