

Daniel Tröhler

*Languages of Education: Protestant Legacies,  
 National Identities, and Global Aspirations*

New York: Routledge, 2011. Xiii, 252 pp.

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For “Wasgij” puzzles (Jigsaw spelled backwards), the picture on the box is not the final product. Rather, it shows people who are looking at what the final image will be. And fitting the pieces together is difficult; often you need to move blocks of pieces since they do not quite fit where you first placed them.

Such a puzzle provides a metaphor for Daniel Tröhler’s *Languages of Education*. Tröhler’s well-researched account of the history of Western schooling pieces together an original narrative rooted in the “languages” of both Protestantism and republicanism. Tröhler has fit together the pieces with discerning care. Yet he has assembled only part of the puzzle. Further work is needed to complete the still somewhat elusive picture. That, of course, is not unusual for a creative work that reshapes standard interpretive frameworks.

Tröhler argues that “languages of education” are oft-unrecognized theoretical regulating systems that can draw out historical understanding while taking into account cultural/national plurality. Such ideologically-based languages of education have evolved over centuries and influence our own thought, aims, and configuration of schooling. The two dominant languages in Western culture, according to Tröhler, are Protestantism and republicanism. Accordingly, Tröhler contrasts the educational effects of Calvinism and Lutheranism as well as of classical and modern republicanism. The Calvinist “language” of Switzerland and the United States has been “inscribed in notions of republican socialization and public virtue” so that the aim of schools was to make children socially and politically active citizens. But the educational language that grew out of German Lutheranism focused on “pure inwardness” and was “strikingly silent” on social and political issues and participation (15).

Tröhler concludes that the intertwined languages of classical republicanism and Calvinism among the Puritans meant that they were patriotic rather than monarchic, egalitarian rather than episcopal, and agrarian rather than commercial and capitalistic. Calvinist theology, Tröhler continues, transformed into a non-confessional, humanist liberal religion of social action. Dewey and his colleagues thus interpreted the social environment according to a non-dogmatic Calvinist Protestant language, promoting a modern republican and pragmatic “Kingdom of God” on earth today. Schools were to be guided by a democratic, social-interactive, and worldly redemptive spirit where knowledge had practical utility for life. Nonetheless, the language of the classical republicanism of virtue and patriotism has always competed with this in American education.

Tröhler shows that Dewey’s progressivism was sharply at odds with German Lutheranism. The Lutheran language of education had *Bildung* as its central focus, developing *Persönlichkeit* (inward formation of integrated, cultivated personalities) in a *Volksgemeinschaft* (a national, communal, unified nation transcending individuals). Learning was to lead to a true *Volk* community through an orientation to the humanities rather than to empiricism—in contrast with Dewey’s “despicable kitchen and handyman utilitarianism” (152). Sadly, of course, the concepts of *Bildung* and *Volksgemeinschaft* became blended in the 1930s with the idea of German superiority. And recently it resulted in fierce German opposition to the supposedly empirical PISA tests.

Tröhler’s conclusions are worthy of careful consideration, and the questions I have are not intended to cast shadows on Tröhler’s basic approach. Rather, noting that Tröhler himself points to the complexity of the issues and how languages of education may compete in particular contexts, I give two examples that highlight the need for more research on how languages of education can clarify educational developments.

First, Tröhler nowhere considers that quintessential Calvinist nation, the Netherlands. The Dutch Calvinist theologian, educator, and one-time prime minister Abraham Kuyper, had an immense impact on the development of Dutch schooling in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Significantly, Kuyper explicitly rejected key aspects of both of what Tröhler calls Calvinist and Lutheran languages of education. Kuyper denied that the modern progressive movement was rooted in Calvinist thought, claiming, instead, that it was rooted in the French Revolution and as such opposed and denied the basis and influence of Calvinism. Kuyper used a distinct Calvinist language that diverged considerably from that described by Tröhler—a language that formed Kuyper’s foundation for looking at politics, science, the arts, and education. This raises the question whether Tröhler’s focus on two polar pairs of languages of education can do justice to the complexities of educational development. Also, both the German and Dutch languages have similar nuances and distinctions in educational vocabulary that are not present in English. Consequently, even while rejecting the Lutheran approach to education, Kuyper’s aims of education showed similarities to German ones. So are there attributes of cultures embedded in languages themselves that go deeper than Tröhler’s “languages of education”?

My second example is the development of schooling in English-speaking Canada. The basis of Egerton Ryerson's approach to education was Calvinist-inspired Scottish Common Sense philosophy. But as A. B. McKillop has shown, the former Methodists and Presbyterians who provided the intellectual foundations for the Canadian social gospel movement did so by renouncing the basic beliefs of their churches and bursting the shell of Calvinism. They fused British idealism with social concerns to improve society. Schools promoted the public good by honouring the British monarchy, eschewing republicanism, and enabling students to become virtuous citizens. Educational progressivism was promoted, but only within the contours of British imperialism. Here also the languages that informed educational developments were more complex than those suggested by Tröhler's analyses.

Using the metaphor of the languages of education holds much promise. However, I am not convinced that Tröhler's languages of Protestantism and republicanism can tell the whole story of the roots and development of Western education, even if we allow for different nuances and entwinements. In short, the puzzle remains unfinished. What Tröhler has accomplished, nevertheless, is to provide an historical tool that gives us insights that go beyond both Whig and Marxist interpretations.