

Easing Concerns Over Religious Release Time Through Deliberative Civics Education

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Suzanne Rosenblith and Benjamin Bindewald effectively argue that the South Carolina Released Time Credit Act (SCRTCA) undermines important functions of public education. They assert that public education should provide students with the “skills, tools, and dispositions to become reasonable, thoughtful, and autonomous people.” I argue that the SCRTCA itself is not the most significant issue that their piece raises. Rather, their concern over the SCRTCA is a reflection on the ineffectiveness of public education at accomplishing the important educational goals of autonomy and critical thinking. In this response, I argue that the public schools have largely marginalized moral conflict as part of the curriculum and, as such, they have missed out on the opportunity to engage students who take advantage of release time in important democratic conversations. As a result, those students, and public school students as a whole, receive an impoverished education that does not enable them to engage with others who hold different moral perspectives in ways that are constructive to democratic society. Schools should provide a more deliberative democratic civics education that aids students in understanding the moral reasoning process and produces citizens with the qualities that Rosenblith and Bindewald desire.

THE MARGINALIZATION OF MORAL CONFLICT

Students rarely have the opportunity to engage meaningfully and democratically with moral conflict at school.¹ The courses in which students are most likely to engage with moral conflict are social studies courses. Although inclusion of social studies in standardized testing regimes ensures their presence on student schedules, the nature of standardized testing and the pressures such testing brings for performance means that students are unlikely to discuss controversial issues. Where social studies is not tested, it is often cut out of the schedule in favor of additional literacy and math classes.² If this were not enough to ensure the exclusion of discussion of controversial issues from the school agenda, there is the fact that controversial issues are controversial. Teachers risk upsetting parents and the community when they engage students in these discussions. For many, the risk is not worth taking given competing pressures.³

Where does this leave our soon-to-be-citizen students? At best, they attend schools where they are taught to interpret a variety of texts in accordance with the Common Core standards referenced by Rosenblith and Bindewald. Educators hope those activities will develop the critical thinking and autonomy within students that are important for citizenship. However, it is likely that those students will never engage in the sort of moral reflexivity that will enable them to encounter themselves and their moral perspectives meaningfully in the texts. Democracy, as a method of governing a society made up of people with pluralistic beliefs, is not well served.

Students may learn to be open-minded and engage with multiple perspectives concerning how to interpret history and literature, but a democratic education should ask students to consider their own moral perspectives and the perspectives of others on issues of societal concern and these perspectives should be connected to people, not just texts, when possible. The Common Core standards do not push students to do this. I do not mean to imply that teachers cannot or do not raise important current moral issues through the texts that are examined. However, because the Common Core standards do not directly address democracy and citizenship, teachers are not provided incentive (and would be hard pressed to find time) to have students engage in sustained democratic deliberation on current political issues.

A DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC SOLUTION

The type of education that Rosenblith and Bindewald want would be well served by a deliberative democratic civics education. This is a civics education that places moral controversy at the center of the civics curriculum. Students engage in a process of reflection on their own moral values and express those moral values to others. They learn to listen to and understand those who have different moral perspectives, engage in discussion about the policy issues flowing from the moral differences, and reflect again on whether their own values and perspectives should change in light of this process. Through this deliberative process, students critically examine their own moral perspectives as well as the moral perspectives of others as part of the process of resolving public policy problems.

A key piece in the deliberative democratic civics education I advocate is making apparent to students the folk epistemology underlying the moral reasoning process. I use Robert Talisse's framework and term "folk epistemology."⁴ The term folk epistemology is used to denote that this is an epistemology aimed at describing how people think about truth in their everyday lives as opposed to a systematic and comprehensive take on the idea of truth.

Folk epistemology rests on a few basic premises. The first is that people are truth-seekers. In other words, people would not say that they believe something that they know to be false. Second, people believe something to be true when they believe it is supported by the best reasons. This does not mean that people agree with one another concerning what constitutes the "best reasons" for believing something, but it does mean that truth is reason-responsive. Third, because truth propositions are supported by reasons, they can be asserted as part of deliberations. Finally, when people assert truth propositions, they enter into social exchanges about the truth. This commits them to the process of deliberation.

Folk epistemology can be used to frame what is occurring in the release time classes. If folk epistemology is accurate, there is not such a bright line between faith-based and evidence-based reasoning. There is simply moral reasoning. Students consider a claim and determine whether it should become part of the moral frameworks against which they evaluate reasons to believe something to be true. Folk epistemology asserts that all claims, even what would be termed faith-based claims, rest on some sort of evidence. Students are engaged in evaluating the

authority of people presenting claims and evidence and the authority upon which the claims and evidence rest. Deliberative democratic civics education makes this process apparent to students.

In addition, deliberative democratic civics education and the folk epistemology upon which it rests communicate to students their autonomy as opposed to submission in the area of moral reasoning. Students learn that they are responsible to evaluate truth claims and that they need not simply accept any truth claim provided to them. In the context of release time classes, deliberative democratic civics education would teach the students that they determine whether to accept what is being presented and that they have a responsibility to weigh the claims being made within their moral frameworks. They also learn that they construct their moral frameworks and determine what constitutes a sufficient reason for changing those frameworks.

Rosenblith and Bindewald correctly identify the serious policy issue with the release time classes, and that is that the release time classes do not provide exposure to multiple viewpoints. The release time providers intend to present a singular perspective on moral truth. This is problematic from the perspective of deliberative democratic civics education. It undermines the opportunity to engage in deliberative exchanges about moral issues and in that way is at odds with a democratic education. For this reason, I agree with Rosenblith and Bindewald that the sanction these courses receive through the SCRTCA should be carefully examined.

Until that happens, however, a deliberative democratic approach to civics education could ease some concerns about the class. An education that takes moral controversies and students' moral reasoning seriously would not marginalize religious perspectives in the classroom. Students could express the religious or secular rationales behind their beliefs and need not cover the religious part of their identities.⁵ The trade-off for openness to religion is that those students will be exposed to other moral perspectives and will need to evaluate their own moral belief structures in light of what they hear. The deeper understanding of a student's belief system that could come from a release time course could benefit the quality of discussion in a deliberative classroom.

Although I agree that release time courses raise policy issues, if this type of deliberative democratic civics education were provided in schools, there would be less reason to fear that release time programs such as the SCRTCA would result in a loss of critical thinking and autonomy. Instead, they could be viewed as a resource as students would come to deliberations with more fully developed understandings of their own moral beliefs. This richer understanding could contribute to the depth of deliberation without fear of loss of autonomy and critical thinking. Students could also take critical thinking back to the release time classes and ask critical questions in that context as a result of their experiences in school.

1. Diana Hess, "Discussing Controversial Public Issues in Secondary Social Studies Classrooms: Learning from Skilled Teachers," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 1 (2002): 10–41.

2. Center on Education Policy, *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2007).
3. See Wayne Journell, "The Influence of High-Stakes Testing on High School Teachers' Willingness to Incorporate Current Political Events into the Curriculum," *The High School Journal* 93, no. 3 (2010): 111–125.
4. Robert B. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
5. The permissibility of religious reasoning in deliberations is not universally accepted. See, for example, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).