

Grounding Social Justice Education in Deweyan Right to Education:  
Prospects and Problems

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Despite appearances, the target of Nicholas Tanchuk, Tomas Rocha and Marc Kruse’s essay “Is Comprehensive Liberal Social Justice Education Brainwashing?” is not, in fact, the criteria that Lauren Bialystok proposes to set reasonable limits on the kinds of things teachers can do and say in class in the name of social justice education.<sup>1</sup> The authors are more concerned with the political and ethical doctrine which, they claim, underlies Bialystok’s criteria—namely, “comprehensive liberalism”—and in particular its apparent lack of normative justification. In the author’s eyes, Bialystok’s work is merely *representative* of a tendency among citizenship education theorists to take as assumed something that needs to be argued for—in example, the promotion of personal autonomy as an educational aim. The idea that the promotion of personal autonomy should be one of the core purposes of public schools in liberal democracies is, of course, the polestar of a whole school of thought in citizenship education theory associated with such preeminent thinkers as Eamonn Callan, Amy Gutmann and Stephen Macedo.<sup>2</sup> If the authors of this essay are onto something, they are onto something big.

The trouble is that they picked the wrong person to mess with in the sense that Bialystok actually goes out of her way to show that her intentions in the essay are chiefly pragmatic. That is to say, the criteria she advances to frame how teachers should handle politicized educational content and, specifically, to distinguish between “brainwashing” and “legitimate political messaging” in schools are ones that, in her view, all or most reasonable parents and educators could

accept no matter what their personal political outlook might be.<sup>3</sup> To illustrate what I mean by “pragmatic,” take her first criteria that educators are permitted to espouse political, social or ethical perspectives which “have legislative backing.” The authors make quite a meal out of this criteria, objecting that it would imply, say, that when residential schools for indigenous children were an integral part of the publicly funded education system in Canada, teachers at the time would have been warranted in promoting and defending their assimilationist (some might say genocidal) goals. Bialystok in fact anticipates this objection in her discussion of law as a work in progress.<sup>4</sup> As I see it, her point is merely this: when teachers are faced with an accusation from a parent, colleague or student that they are “brainwashing” students, being able to show that the viewpoint they are promoting in class is consistent with the laws and constitutionally recognized rights and freedoms of the state they work for is a pretty good defense! I’m quite sure that the authors would reply to this reading by pointing out that the problem is rather that the legal framework itself supposes comprehensive liberalism which tells us nothing about whether or not comprehensive liberalism is “true.” Such a reply, however, would fail to appreciate Bialystok’s lighter touch. All she is saying is that if a particular political view has statutory backing, then it is *justifiable* for teachers to promote it in public schools—or that most parents and educators should consider promoting it justifiable. She is quite careful in the essay to make it clear that while she, personally, tends to support comprehensive liberalism, she is not prepared to commit to the claim that it is ultimately *justified* in some deep philosophical or metaphysical sense.

This little misunderstanding may not matter much because, as I said, what the authors are most interested in doing in their essay is exposing comprehensive liberalism’s lack of normative foundations and proposing their own Deweyan alternative to what they see as the

dogmatic promotion of comprehensive liberalism among citizenship education theorists. I sympathise with the first objective and am intrigued by the second.

The authors are undoubtedly right to point out that the idea that public schools in liberal-democratic societies have a duty to foster among students the capability to freely choose and pursue the conception of the good life that they judge to be right for themselves is certainly something of a sacred cow in citizenship education theory. They may go too far in asserting that no “ultimate grounding for the commitment to [comprehensive liberalism]. . . . exist[s] in the literature.” At least as far as political liberalism is concerned, Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls had a good run at the problem.<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, it is safe to say that personal autonomy promotion as an aim of education has the status of an axiom in certain quarters of the educational literature.

If one needs evidence that the concept of personal autonomy lacks traction almost everywhere in the social sciences and humanities except in citizenship education theory, one need only browse through the results of a Google Scholar search. For decades now, the concept of personal autonomy has been under relentless assault. So much so that for those with even a cursory acquaintance with the advances in knowledge about the conditions and possibility of rational choice, the tireless hand wringing about autonomy promotion that has characterized citizenship education theory since the 1990s can seem like so much yawn inducing inside baseball. Indeed, what makes this work seem at times rather more like theology than philosophy is not just the lack of “ultimate grounding” for the central concept, but the sense that it is somehow beyond the pale even to raise questions about whether the notion that education should promote personal autonomy might need to be justified or explained.

As for the proposed alternative to comprehensive liberalism as a basis for autonomy promotion in schools put forward in the essay, the idea that such a justification can be found by appealing to the value of education itself rather than “external political values” is definitely interesting. The argument seems to be that if one accepts the Deweyan idea that the *raison d'être* of education is “to promote learning and problem solving in community,” then there is a perfectly serviceable justification for inclusion and embracing diversity built right into the purpose of education. From this perspective, we need not go outside education and draw on a substantive political doctrine like comprehensive liberalism to do the required justificatory work.

Still, I have trouble seeing how this idea is more than just fancy for the right to education (“education” being defined in a specific Deweyan sense), and if this is the case then the foundations of the position the authors are putting forward in their essay might be even shakier than comprehensive liberalism’s. Reason being that if we accept to play the “ultimate foundations” game the authors are proposing, it is apparent that the authors have not provided one for their alternative to comprehensive liberalism. More importantly, I would hazard that whatever ultimate justification there might be for a Deweyan *right* to education, it is almost certain to converge with whatever ultimate justification there might be for the right to personal autonomy. Both, after all, are rights; if they are important to pursue in schools it is *because* they are rights. To make matters worse for the authors, the onus would appear to be on them to make a convincing case for the existence of a *Deweyan* right to education as well. On what grounds should we accept their prioritization of learning in community over and above not only personal autonomy, but any other of the numerous alternative accounts of the most important aims of education that litter the history of educational ideas? What makes learning in com-

munity more compelling than, say, happiness and self-confidence à la Alexander S, Neill, self-actualization à la Carl Rogers, conscientization à la Paulo Freire or even maximizing human capital à la Gary Becker?<sup>6</sup>

Bialystok's criteria are highly attractive as is her approach to establishing it. She addresses the issue in terms that are meaningful for educators: how to draw the line between the *legitimate use* of a teacher's authority to promote particular-shared values, and the results of political decision making, and the *abuse* of teacher authority by imposing personal beliefs on a captive audience of students. The standard she sets for justifying the criteria is relatively modest and therefore realistic: rationally compelling for concerned parties in a particular time and place. The authors of this essay are right to be skeptical about the blind faith that some citizenship education theorists place in personal autonomy as an aim of education, but they are wrong to think that Bialystok is one of them.

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1 Nicolas Tanchuk, Tomas Rocha, and Marc Kruse, "Is Comprehensive Liberal Social Justice Education Brainwashing?" *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 2 (2021); Lauren Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing': A Philosophical Defence of Social Justice Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2014): 415.

2 Eamon Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Stephen Macedo *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship Virtue and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

3 Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing,'" 429.

4 Bialystok, 433.

5 Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ:

Princeton University Press, 2013); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993).

6 Alexander S. Neill, *Summerhill* (London: Hart Publishing Company, 1960); Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (New York, NY: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishers, 1970); Gary Becker, *Human Capital* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).