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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

CARING FOR HARD TRUTHS IN A SHARED WORLD

Samantha Deane
Boston College

The post-truth era brought some clarity to the scholarly search for the truth and a heap of confusion to public conversations about how to describe what is real. Take Truth Social, a quintessential example of post-truth spin. The social media site was built by Donald Trump's technology and media company. Marketed as an alternative to Twitter and Facebook, Truth Social was designed to be a bastion of free speech. In the social imagery of Trumpism and post-truthers, free speech and truth are twin projects: the more open (i.e. uncensored) and free discourse there is, the more difficult it will be for elites (e.g. academics and politicians alike) to conceal truths about vaccines or guns, for example, from everyday Americans.

Post-truth is a confusing concept. It refers to a context, an era, if you like, in which truth is employed as a "mechanism for asserting political dominance."¹ In this post-truth scene, truth, objective fact, becomes irrelevant to someone's sense of what feels real. "What feels real" becomes the "truth" to which politicians cater. This is Colbert's "truthiness."² It is not wholly wrong to say that the truth is what feels real to me. Experience is a powerful teacher. As philosophers of education, we love to talk about experience. Different here in the public post-truth moment is a willingness, ability even, to grapple with how to verify personal experience given the conflicting experience of others. Though postmodernism gets the blame for ushering these conversations into being, questions about the veracity of experience ground social life.

The origin story of post-truth generally goes something like this: first, academics/scientists started questioning stable truth. Second, the advent of social media made it easier for everyone to share their queries into reality. Third, politicians, domestic and foreign, used confusion about how to make sense of reality to their advantage, and finally, lost in the chaos of "information," the media cemented the arrival of post-truth when they too began to report on both sides, e.g. on feelings. In this vein, the RAND Corporation tells us that agents of truth decay are indeed the media, such as Truth Social and Facebook, political

¹ Lee C McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), xiv.

² Ben Zimmer, "Truthiness," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2010, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17FOB-onlanguage-t.html>.

actors and governments, foreign actors, but also academia and research organizations.³

Is it a surprise to see academia lumped in with the likes of Truth Social? Are we as much to blame for the rapid spread of post-truthism as the authoritarian populists who aim to wreak havoc on the public square? I think not. Though academics do argue about the truth, this is an act of care. In his follow-up to *On Bullshit*, aptly titled *On Truth*, Harry Frankfurt asks, “Is truth something that in fact we do—and should—especially care about? Or is the love of truth, as professed by so many distinguished thinkers and writers, itself merely another example of bullshit?”⁴ Bullshit, in Frankfurt’s analytic taxonomy, is evident in utterances that exhibit “indifference [laxity] to how things really are.”⁵ Truth, consequently, is attentive care for the reality we inhabit.

The immense consternation over the concept of post-truth signals, I think, that, we philosophers of education of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society do, in fact, care about the truth. The collection of articles in this issue address with patient care how things are. No whiffs of bullshit here. Yet, it is not precisely bullshit that led RAND to label academia broadly an agent of truth decay. Bullshit is *merely* a lack of rigor surrounding attempts to discern and describe the truth. RAND, like the post-truth narrative, lumps academics in with Truth Social because both Truth Social and Academia provide a venue to test and query experience. Both modes of public address can undermine another’s effort to objectively describe reality. The key difference and the barometer by which we ought to judge the outputs of each is the extent to which the author/speaker/social-media-poster/interlocuter rigorously aims to attend to reality as they seek to make sense of this hard truth: this world is shared with ontologically diverse creatures who/that impact our ability to flourish and we theirs.

Getting at this hard truth in a post-truth era, as these articles demonstrate, requires three things. One, a good nose for bullshit. I am imagining an olfactory-like sense that register disgusts as one detects laxity in thought, “political spin,” and run-of-the-mill lies. Two, the capacity to stare down the techniques and technologies of power. McIntyre notes, “post-truth” is about the way in which “facts are subordinated to our political point of view.”⁶ In so far as post-truth is a political process of rewriting reality, the post-truth buster must get

³ In the spirit of the articles assembled in this issue, it is worthwhile to consider who and what are not on this list. There is no mention of everyday people who willfully create or spread misinformation, of corporations and agencies that mediate economic activity, of religious institutions, or the juggernaut that is generative AI. “Truth Decay: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions,” accessed July 19, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/about-truth-decay.html>.

⁴ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Knopf, 2006), 14.

⁵ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: University Press, 2009), 34, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400826537>.

⁶ Lee C McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 11.

inside of the mechanics of power that reforms individuals into untethered ideologues. Three, in the spirit of Simone Weil, there is no better exercise of truth than tracing down *our* faults.⁷ Philosophy of education, but more specifically, this volume of *Philosophical Studies in Education* is a record of our collective and public failures to enact relational, future-oriented, equitable, and holistic educational ontologies. To out the truth, to care for what is real, the authors here confront the faults they find in the systems, practices, and people who/that affect educational praxis for flourishing in a shared world.

In the sprint of careful attention to our relational reality, Amy B. Shuffelton's presidential address, "The Hard Truth of Cinderella's Gender Identity" examines the hard choices women and girls encounter when negotiating their gender in a patriarchal culture. Far more than a tract on the double bind of Cinderella or Rapunzel, Shuffelton attends to the faults of HB1577, Florida's Parental Rights in Education bill while urging us to resist the post-truth habit of jumping to ideological conclusions before we've attended to the semantic construction of the bill. What does the bill's odd semantic construction, the apparent non-sequitur about teaching sex and gender identity, tell us about our social psyche? Shuffelton answers, "what is expressed in a slip is what is hard to say outright and points to a genuine dilemma" regarding "who *should* be involved in children's development of a sense of themselves as sexed and gendered humans."⁸ In answer, she suggests that everyone—parents, teachers, children, biological researchers, medical practitioners—should: we are relational beings. Inquiries into how we live together (which are questions about sex and gender) must be engaged democratically.

The questions Kathleen Knight Abowitz raises in her response "Manichean Politics, Cultural Pluralism, and Fear," revolve around the populist political context of parenting in the era of bills like Florida's HB1577, and the weaponized "fear of the queer child."⁹ Drawing on Chantal Mouffe and Harry Boyte, Knight Abowitz reminds us that populism is narrative. When coupled with fraying commitments to truth, populist movements, and the we/they logic on which they thrive, quickly devolve into Manichean politics where hatred, anger, and fear shape our retreat into like-minded enclaves. Though the conceptual construction of post-truth tells us that the battle for truth is on the front lines of ideology, Knight Abowitz suggests more progress may be made if we shift our attention to the cultural front. When we consider cultural narratives as sites of contest about how we live together, we recognize the near-universal struggle to define, craft, and pass on a life of meaning and purpose. In friendly

⁷ Richard M. Gamble, *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Educated Human Being* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 589–95.

⁸ Amy B. Shuffelton, "The Hard Truth of Cinderella's Gender Identity," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54 (2023).

⁹ Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Manichean Politics, Cultural Pluralism, and Fear," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54 (2023).

conversation, Knight Abowitz and Shuffelton expand our understanding of parenting sexed and gendered humans in undemocratic times.

This kind of engagement with questions about how we can account for reality, and tell the truth, while attending to the boundless unknown characterize the articles in this volume. Martha Perez-Mugg, Joy Dangora Erickson and Winston C. Thompson, and Derek T. M. Daskalakes each explore our obligations to students *qua* students in a democratic society. In Perez-Mugg's contribution, she draws a connection between legislative bills and parental rights activism that seek to shape the content of classroom conversations and the cultivation of epistemic agency. Treating students as knowers and learners first, she worries that placing limits on the kind of information children are taught limits their capacity to develop as knowers and erodes trust in the process of education. Dangora Erickson and Thompson, in a similar spirit, evaluate reading interventions to ask, "Do present constraints on children's freedoms within reading interventions interfere with their developing capacities for freedom and impact their flourishing?" Weighing a child's developing capacities for autonomy and their right to an open future, Dangora Erickson and Thompson challenge the rationale for interventionist reading programs that thoroughly limit a child's voice in what, where, and how they learn. They suggest instead, that, "regular feedback from students is necessary for a liberatory education."¹⁰ For his part, Daskalakes, argues that a liberal conception of the student underwrites assessments of students with intellectual disabilities and that this results in undue and unjust restrictions on their learning.

Speaking of liberation from restrictive educational frames, Thomas Falk offers a scathing review of the authoritarian landscape that generates "mass epistemic hysteria" via loads of post-truth nonsense.¹¹ The problem, discerns Falk, is the authoritarian assault on language and truth alongside evolving modes of surveillance capitalism (que Alexa) that crowds out all the ontological space to think, attend, and emphasize. Committed to a relational democratic education, Falk balks at states of cowering vigilance and cheerful nihilism that grow in the wake of authoritarian education. Following Simone Weil, he suggests that our moral and ethical life are formed in the practice of deep attention.

While Falk troubles states of vigilance propelled by slips toward authoritarianism, Kenneth Driggers and Abbey Hortenstine critique calls for teacher vigilance in the absence of any definition of who or what a teacher is. After reviewing state ethics codes for definitions of teacher *qua* teacher, they argue that the current habit is to define teacher negatively. Engaging with Charles Bingham on a Derridian dive into teaching, Driggers and Hortenstine aim to

¹⁰Joy Dangora Erickson & Winston C. Thompson, "On Reading Interventions, Flourishing, and an Open Future: Considering Children's Present and Future Freedoms," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54 (2023).

¹¹ Thomas Falk, "Anti-Authoritarian Education: A Phenomenological Perspective," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54 (2023).

define what teachers are, which, they say, “pointers” toward ontological relations.¹² Unlike Bingham and in line with Falk’s contribution, they agree that vigilance is a non-starter. Teachers cannot vigilance their way out of the iterative nature of language and experience. They too call for careful attention to the world. Attention short-circuits vigilance, “by redirecting their [students] attention to things and the world, investigating them in themselves *and* as they are constituted by the ontological difference that makes them what they are, teachers and students both learn about structural iterability and circumvent the need for vigilance...” A teacher points to the world so that they and their students might train their attention on the relationships that constitute the political.

The final set of articles by Bryan Warnick and Tanya Bomsta explore the narrative dimensions of education for democratic life. In her contribution, Bomsta suggests a turn toward autobiography, claiming that when, treated as a genre with all the limitations genre conveys, autobiography is a powerful tool to get inside of a personal experience, religious or otherwise. In his article, Warnick wades into the debate about how to teach historical truth, a debate at the heart of the CRT wars. Which stories should we tell? Which heroes should we highlight? Though he does not turn to autobiography like Bomsta, Warnick does urge us to seek out narratives and histories of resistance. After considering the role of patriotism in civic life, truth in patriotism, and the heroes in patriotic sentiment. Warnick concludes patriotic sentiments fuel political risk-taking: “Most people do not undertake political risks for abstract reasons alone; rather, they do so because those reasons have come to deeply resonate on an emotional level.”¹³ And heroes, it just so happens, are emotional triggers. However, rather than attempting to resuscitate figures like Woodrow Wilson with tales of their humanity, we can and should uncover the stories of those who resisted moral darkness.

Resisting moral darkness by sussing out and sharing human stories of resistance is a practice of bearing witness to the truth. It is an act of care for this world. The variety of articles enclosed in this volume reminds me that care for our shared world comes in many forms. I’m reminded here of Maggie Nelson’s recent work on freedom and care. Nelson writes, “caretaking, the reparative, making life more livable and humane for us all—all of these things matter enormously. But, for better or worse, they are not everything. For many—perhaps even most—life feels more ample, more livable, ‘wider and more various,’ when it *doesn’t* reduce to one long episode of caretaking or repair.”¹⁴ Life feels better when not everything we do and work on has a clear use value.

¹² Kenneth Driggers & Abbey Hortenstine, “On The Impossibility of Vigilance: A Phenomenological Re-Articulation of the teacher,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54 (2023).

¹³ Bryan Warnick, Heroes, Patriotic Education, and the Shadows of History, *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54 (2023).

¹⁴ Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2021), 63.

And the last thing I want to suggest is that all work in philosophy of education ought to be reparative. Yet what has use, feels reparative, and makes life more livable is at least to some extent semantics. Appreciating in tandem the philosophic argument, the craft of a paper, and the ways in which an author aims to repair fissures in our ability to peaceably inhabit a shared world adds texture and amplitude to our repertoire of care for the reality of our shared world.

What does it mean to share a world and care for it with texture and amplitude? To draw this introduction to a close, bear with me for a moment as I reflect on what it is like to share a world with a “pre-truthy” toddler. Each morning my two-and-a-half-year-old wakes up mumbling “It’s not daytime yet.” Nothing I do will convince her otherwise. “Look outside,” I say. “It’s not daytime” she replies. All day long we disagree over whether it is day or night. Sun, sky, moon, stars, time, have zero bearing on her feelings about whether it is time to play or sleep. And why should they? Night and day are human-made concepts that capture our biological need to sleep when our body produces melatonin, not to mention productivity demands of industrial life or the metaphorical vastness of the conceptual pair. None of this relates to the world of a toddler. Her world is one of feeling, play, and defiance. All hail “[her] majesty, the baby,” to paraphrase Freud. Most mornings, I respond by changing the subject. “It’s not daytime,” she says. I reply, “Alright. What do you want for breakfast?”

Toddlers are pre-truthers (if a post-truther is someone constituted by the loss of truth’s bearing, then a pre-truther is constituted by their urgent desire to understand “why” anything is what it is) and sharing a world with them, a toddler that is, is as maddening as it is joyous. But perhaps this is the hardest truth: we could use a little more pre-truthiness. Toddlers are wrestling with concepts to figure out how all the words they hear accord with the reality they experience. They are intimately, joyously, and urgently engaged in a playful encounter with existence in an unfolding world. As a rough heuristic for navigating the populist, post-truth, Manichean political world, might we all benefit from a little more pre-truthy attention to how the world unfolds around us? It’s noteworthy that all of the contributions here avoid or outright deny the role of vigilance in the task of caring for our shared world. In closing his introduction to the 2022 edition of *Philosophical Studies in Education*, Derek Gottlieb drew on Cavell to end with this note, “The price of liberty is our subjection to eternal vigilance.”¹⁵ The contributors here offer an alternative. Vigilance encourages us to hunker down. It sends our shoulders to our ears and perpetuates panoptic surveillance. Contra Cavell, Emerson, and the long history of American political discourse that links vigilance to freedom, these articles suggest that the price of liberty is deep attention to the world we manifest together.

¹⁵ Derek Gottlieb, “Introduction: Hard Truth and Good Cheer,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 53 (2022): 6.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE HARD TRUTH OF CINDERELLA'S GENDER IDENTITY

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Cinderella's gender identity would seem to be obvious, but is it really? The restrictions placed on teenagers during the COVID pandemic cast her actions in a new light. Was it really the prince she wanted, or did she just want to get out of the house? Not that anyone asked her, but in most versions of the story she expresses more interest in a night out than in royal nuptials *per se*. Acting *in loco parentis*, an unrelated older woman dumps on her the dress, the heels, the pumpkin limo. Sure, she danced with the prince, as one does. But he was the one who mobilized state power to stalk her, tracking her down with the shoe like the FBI using cell phone records. Cinderella's mother, notably, was out of the picture, which caused all her problems in the first place. Nor is Cinderella the only fairy tale teenage girl who found her means of getting out of the house strictly limited. Consider Rapunzel, who let her hair down of her own volition when a man came knocking and was otherwise stuck in a tower for the rest of her life. Come to think of it, those COVID restrictions were the tip of the iceberg. Rapunzel's very name, like Cinderella's, comes from the hard choices faced by girls and women, then and now. Without anyone to protect her, Cinderella was reduced to a kitchen wench. As for Rapunzel, her name comes from rampion, or bellflower, a wild plant whose leaves can be eaten like spinach. It was craved by her pregnant mother, who had to make the hard choice between the prenatal vitamins she and her unborn baby needed and keeping the baby after the woman in whose garden she foraged demanded the baby as a price for the greens. Call it a choice if you must, but let's not forget how unappealing the options were. Maybe Cinderella and Rapunzel wanted heterosexual romance, but maybe they just wanted something other than confinement and subservience.

So let's not jump to conclusions too fast.

In March, 2022, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida signed into law the "Parental Rights in Education" bill, nicknamed by opponents the "Don't Say Gay Bill." As jumping to conclusions too fast is precisely what concerns me, I shall eschew the ideological side-taking built into both names and use the bill's most neutral moniker: HB1557.¹ If you try to take HB1557 at face value, what's most surprising is how banal most of its stipulations are. The whole is an addition to Title XLIX of Florida's Statutes, on Parental Rights. Before HB1557, a parent

¹ Parental Rights in Education Act, HB 1557. Florida House of Representatives (2022).

already had the right to “direct the education and care of his or her minor child,” a right recognized by the US Supreme Court since 1923 and therefore held by parents in all states.² That right, in Florida’s Title XLIX, comes with a boatload of ancillary rights, including the right to “access and review all school records relating to his or her minor child.” The HB1557’s key addition is that the school must “adopt procedures for notifying a student’s parent if there is a change in the student’s services or monitoring related to the student’s mental, emotional or physical health and the school’s ability to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for the student.” As a freestanding directive, this seems not a bad idea, especially at a time when the Surgeon General has declared adolescent mental health to be a national crisis. If teachers noticed changes in my child’s mental health, we should talk. Banal.

The first hint that something more is going on comes with the restatement of the parental right at stake. In Title XLIX, it was to “direct the education and care” of the child. In HB1557, that right becomes “the fundamental right of parents to make decisions regarding the upbringing *and control* of their children.” Control? First, please permit me, as the mother of two teenagers, to roll my eyes. Yeah, right, as my generation liked to say. As if. Reality aside, the choice of words is a red flag.

HB1557 next requires school personnel to “encourage a student to discuss issues relating to his or her wellbeing with his or her parent or to facilitate discussion of the issue with the parent.” Again, in principle, it’s a good idea, though hardly likely to stop the Dancing Princesses and Sleeping Beauties of the world from ignoring parents and good fairies alike and doing what they wanted anyway. The idea that parents and teachers ought to communicate about the mental, emotional and physical health of minors, however, seems reasonable enough. Not that DeSantis and the Florida Legislature likely had this in mind, but it’s also supported by the Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People, Volume 8 (SOC8), the internationally recognized healthcare guidelines issued in 2022 by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH).³

This all comes with the caveat that school personnel are not required to do any of this if a reasonably prudent person would believe the information would put the child at risk of abuse or neglect. Second red flag here—*why would it?*

² In *Meyer v Nebraska*, the Court ruled 7-2 that the rights protected by the 14th Amendment included the rights “to marry, establish a home and bring up children,” which precluded Nebraska’s law against teaching foreign languages. *Meyer* laid the groundwork for a series of later laws protecting, besides parents’ rights, marriage rights (*Loving v Virginia*, *Obergefell v Hodges*), reproductive rights (*Griswold v Connecticut*, *Roe v Wade*) and same sex equality (*Lawrence v Texas*).

³ *International Journal of Transgender Health* 23, sup 1 (2022): S1-S259. See especially chapters 6 and 7, on Adolescents and Children, which recommend that parents, teachers, and other qualified professionals work together.

The clause that follows offers an answer to that question. Notoriously, HB1557 prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in K-3 classrooms. Again, Yeah Right. Show me a K-3 classroom library that depicts no heterosexual romance or family, no characters differentiated by sex, no conventionally gendered characters. It is impossible to avoid instruction. But through the juxtaposition of this clause with the previous ones, the law offers itself to be read as requiring schools to “out” LGBTQ-presenting children to their parents—one of the kinds of “notification” and “discussion” that might put a child at risk—even though it never literally states that. The clause on sex education reads as a non-sequitur, in fact, unless you connect the restrictions on classroom instruction on sex and sexuality to the rights of parents to control their children, which, in the months since the bill’s passage, politicians have made clear is precisely what HB1557 was meant to do. What makes pernicious the law’s between-the-lines strictures, which otherwise might be so vague as to be unenforceable, are HB1557’s subsequent clauses about how parents can take school districts to court, at the school district’s expense, for failing to uphold the law. Third red flag. The law’s power lies in the combination of its vagueness with its provision of a fuel injection to hyper-litigious Americans. The HB1557 works by exerting a constant nebulous threat. It provides a recipe for liquid surveillance of schools by parents, at the expense of the schools. Ironically, the bill’s force is explained by no one better than Michel Foucault.

In sum, HB1557 represents a bad faith attempt by politicians to intimidate teachers and school districts. It is also, in the way of populist politics generally, a clever effort by a political elite to whip up support for conservative politicians by means of scapegoating and dog-whistling. That much is obvious. Direct critique of its most objectionable elements—the gag on discussing sexual orientation and gender identity before grade four, the detailed instructions on how to sue your kid’s school—is too easy to be in any way *philosophically* interesting. Dog bites man. And moral outrage, appropriate as it may be, is not in itself good philosophy—especially when the target is so philosophically flimsy. Dog bites straw man.

HB1557, however, does raise—in spite of itself—some philosophically interesting questions. To get at those, consider its structure. An addition to Section 8 of Florida Statute 1001.42, “Powers and Duties of District School Board,” item 8, “Student Welfare,” it contains 89 lines of substantive text. Sexual orientation and gender identity are each mentioned just once, in the above cited reference to classroom instruction. Read literally, HB1557 says absolutely nothing about *students* who come out as LGBTQ. It requires the synthesis of two rhetorical features of this text to make it a means for parents to bring charges against schools that “let kids say gay” before fourth grade and that recognize students as LGBTQ. First, “the student’s mental, emotional and physical health and well-being” has to be understood to include sexual orientation and gender identity. Irony again here—that sexuality and gender identity are matters of *health*, rather than morality, is already a concession to progressive views. This

law goes even further, implicitly conceding the rather large point that children's mental health is affected by the recognition or misrecognition of identities. Secondly, that freestanding clause proscribing mention of sexual orientation or gender identity in classroom instruction, its sparse five lines about curriculum buried in the middle of 84 lines about parents' rights, has to work as a Freudian slip of sorts, an allusion to adults' fantasies of control and anxieties about its loss that underlie the rest of the text. In calling it a slip, I do not mean that the clause's inclusion was anything other than deliberate on the part of legislators, but rather that its disjunctive placement unlocks HB1557's meaning. At face value, like all slips, it reads as a non sequitur, an add-in about curriculum to a bill otherwise about parent rights, connected only by the proximity of words to words, not by any flow of logic. Understood as a kind of parapraxis of the social psyche, it's a tip off.

Like all parapraxes, this is a hard truth. Hard in the sense of difficult because what's expressed in a slip is what's hard to say outright. Hard also in the sense of solid, solid inasmuch as it points to a genuine dilemma. That dilemma, I mean to suggest, *is* philosophically interesting. Who *should* be involved in children's development of a sense of themselves as sexed and gendered humans—a realm of the psyche that both is and isn't subject to "control"? I am working here with a loose interpretation of sex, sexuality and gender that assumes them to be to some degree biological, thus subject to control only through significant medical interventions, and to some degree social, directable and educable though not controllable. In this address I shall not go beyond that loose theorization of sex and gender, in part because I take this also to be a hard-to-accept truth: When it comes to the formation of sexual desire and gender identity, we have fewer hard truths to rely on than we might wish to think. Also, I have nothing new to offer that conversation beyond a plea for epistemic humility and curiosity. My answer to "who should be involved" is "everyone." I rest that conclusion on the requirements of democratic self-governance in a pluralistic society, but before making that case I rule out two other grounds on which alternative answers are based: knowledge and rights.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Lauren Bialystok's recent work on identity and authenticity cogently exposes problems created when we look to "hard truths" about the metaphysics of identity as means to justify our ethical and political projects. Through analysis of two pertinent examples—the case of Joseph Boyden, a Canadian writer whose claims to Indigenous identity have been challenged, and the case of Kenneth Zucker's Toronto gender clinic, which was at the forefront of progressive treatments of gender dysphoria until activists declared its approach toxic and it was shut down. Both cases, Bialystok shows, work through reference to claims of "authentic" identity, though the arguments made about ethnic and gender authenticity create too many ontological conundrums to serve as legitimate means of solving the political and ethical dilemmas they tackle. What we need,

says Bialystok, is “more education”—“a conscious, iterative process of gathering diverse points of reference and exploring them with patience, rigour, and open-mindedness.” More education is indeed an excellent idea, but Bialystok’s answer leaves open the uncomfortable question of how to raise and educate children in the meantime, especially when decisions that have potentially enormous stakes have to be made before “more education” is achieved.⁴

The responsibility for acting without certain knowledge is particularly poignant in regards to children’s gender identity, the data on which has been doing curious things lately. In the early twenty-teens, published data started showing a dramatic increase in the absolute numbers of children reporting gender dysphoria as well as a shift in demographics. Previously, such children had been disproportionately male/assigned-male-at-birth,⁵ and the gender dysphoria was reported in early childhood. That ratio has changed, and the majority of children presenting with gender dysphoria are now girls/assigned-female-at-birth, many of whom had presented as unproblematically cisgender until puberty.⁶ As for the exponential increase over the past two decades of children declaring gender dysphoria, in the UK, the number has risen 44-fold, and peer nations report comparable increases.⁷ Unclear, and highly politicized, is how to interpret this data. One argument is that it represents a population of trans children who, for the first time, have been able to access health care that had been previously denied, as this sudden rise coincides with new developments in health care and the growing acceptance of trans persons. A second explanation points out that the rise also coincides almost exactly with the rapid expansion of social media into the lives of pubescent and prepubescent children and thus points to shifts created by technology use. Real numbers that had previously been hidden by stigma, or social contagion?⁸ Or perhaps both? Warrants can be found for very different assertions, with starkly different political and ethical consequences.

Problematically, to research this population of Cinderellas and Rapunzels is to walk into a political minefield. In 2018, Brown University researcher Lisa Littman published an article about the phenomenon in the highly-selective journal PLOS ONE. Littman had noticed that female friends were declaring gender dysphoria in groups, around puberty, and she surveyed 256 parents of such girls to get a sense of corollary phenomena—including social

⁴ Lauren Bialystok, “Political and Metaphysical: Reflections on Identity, Education and Justice,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 27, no. 2 (2020): 153-169.

⁵ I use both terms—male and assigned-male-at-birth—in acknowledgement of the fact that some children went on to live as male, others as trans.

⁶ See, eg. N. M. de Graaf, G. Giovanardi, C. Zitz, *et al.*, “Sex Ratio in Children and Adolescents Referred to the Gender Identity Development Service in the UK (2009–2016),” *Arch Sex Behav* 47 (2018): 1301–1304.

⁷ Andrew Gilligan, “Surge in Girls Switching Gender,” *Sunday Times*, 29 June 2019.

⁸ Important to note that “social contagion” can sound derogatory—as if “trans identity” were a disease—but sociologists use this as a technical term. Certainty that older women in Salem were witches is another instance of social contagion, as can be more positive shifts, like declining rates of teenage smoking and underage drinking.

media use, mental health, and changes in their children's relationships with other friends, peers, and parents. Parents reported a high correlation between what Littman called "rapid onset gender dysphoria" and declines in mental health, as well as positive and widespread relationship networks. They also reported—as have other studies—a high correlation between declared gender dysphoria and diagnosed autism and ADHD. Again, warrants can be found for a number of assertions, and they quickly were. Littman's article was accused of proposing a new, unjustified diagnosis—rapid onset gender dysphoria—based on limited, inadequate research. PLOS ONE re-reviewed it and republished it, with a note from Littman emphasizing that her research was *not* suggesting a new diagnostic category—simply suggesting that this was an area that demanded further exploration—alongside a letter from one of her critics hinting at an accusation of transphobia.

Littman is just one of many scholars whose scholarship on gender identity has been attacked—other examples include Rebecca Tuvel's, Kenneth Zucker's, and Kathleen Stock's.⁹ In their 2021 publication "The Gender Wars, Academic Freedom and Education," Judith Suissa and Alice Sullivan argue that these, and other, "current conflicts around sex and gender are not about trans rights per se," which they (and, for the record, I) support. Rather, the conflicts in the rarefied world of academic research are about "the imposition of ontological claims underlying a particular ideological position. Often associated with the intellectual traditions of postmodernism and queer theory, this position entails denying the material reality and political salience of sex as a category and rejecting the rights of women as a sex class. Disallowing discussion on these points is a feature of and . . . fundamental to a prominent strand of activism associated with this position," which they and others refer to as gender identity ideology.¹⁰ The problem Suissa and Sullivan identify is a shift from ideas to ideology—a dangerous move, as Charles Mills reminds us.¹¹ Like this address, Suissa and Sullivan's argument is not a new stance on the metaphysics of gender and sex. Rather, they register concern about the curtailment of academic freedom, and about its effects on real human beings, that results from the ideologization of gender ontology. As they detail in their article, there are serious grounds for concern that experimental treatments—which, in a sense, is *all* treatments, as childhood presentation of gender dysphoria is not the same phenomenon now that it was even five years ago—are not being subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Puberty blockers, for instance, have not been approved by the

⁹ Rebecca R. Tuvel, "In defense of transracialism," *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (2017): 263-278; K. Zucker, H. Wood, D. Singh, & S. Bradley, "A developmental, biopsychosocial model for the treatment of children with gender identity disorder," *Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no. 3 (2012): 369-397; Kathleen Stock, *Material Girl*, (London, UK: Fleet, 2021).

¹⁰ Judith Suissa and Alice Sullivan, "The Gender Wars: Academic Freedom and Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, no. 1 (2021): 55.

¹¹ Charles Mills, "Ideal Theory as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2005).

FDA for treatment of gender dysphoria, though they are commonly used to treat it, a fact that in itself means neither that this use is unsafe nor that it is safe. New and necessary lines of research in biology, sociology, public health, and more are not being taken up out of fear of attack. Citing Arendt, Suissa and Sullivan extend their concern beyond gender issues to encompass the hazards to democracy of an ideologized academic sphere.¹² Their article is, like Bialystok's, a call for education—but with more bite.

In this brave new world, Cinderella has new means of escape. Uncomfortable with newly developing hips and breasts and with wearing the dresses that accentuate them to turn on princes, unexcited by the prospect of a girl's life, and hungry for social change in an unjust world, Cinderella adopts the name Ember and he/him pronouns. There aren't enough mental health practitioners available for all the teens who need one these days, not that he would have asked his stepmom to make an appointment anyway, so he diagnoses himself with gender dysphoria on the basis of YouTube videos. YouTube provides fairy godmothers aplenty, answering every wish and beckoning more likeminded fairies through the magic of algorithms over which state and parents alike have no control, and Ember's teachers have gone through 60-minute training sessions on how to respond to gender non-confirming kids, plus the school is committed to affirming LGBTQ youth, so Ember finds plenty of support. "Kids know who they are," the teachers tell Ember's dad when he shows up to parent-teacher conferences, eager to support his kid during the scant moments when he's not traveling for work but baffled by this sudden change. Just last spring, Ember was thrilled to get a new dress and waltzed around the house singing Bippity Boppity Boo. Now he seems withdrawn and depressed. Ember's dad remembers watching *The Breakfast Club* back when he was 15 and how sure he and his friends were that teenagers were a million times kinder and better than *their* parents. Now he's not sure what to think.

ACTION WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE

Hard truth: reliance on hard truths is not a solution. To be sure, teenagers would be better served by a de-ideologization of the study of sexuality and gender identity, such that scholars could address important questions about the psycho-social formation of identities and desires, about the short- and long-term benefits and risks of medical interventions, about the effects of social media and increased access to trans-friendly health care, among other things. And to be sure, scholarship to date has often made a positive difference. All the same, even if we did know more, that knowledge would offer only partial guidance. After calling for "more education," Bialystok concludes that "as citizens and as educators, our task is to better understand who we are and who we ought to be." Who we *are* is knowable to some extent, though a full answer to the question

¹² I read Robert Talisse's *Overdoing Democracy* too late to include his discussion of "belief polarization" in this address, but Talisse adds an important dimension to what worries Suissa and Sullivan and also me. See Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

surely exceeds everything scholarship—encompassing both empirical research and more humanistic contemplation—can tell us. Who we *ought to be* is even more wholly a matter of ethics and politics. In a pluralistic democracy, who we ought to be is also something we need to decide, at least in part, together, as we are relational beings who can only become who we ought to be insofar as others support that becoming. This hard truth about us is what makes school policy regarding how adults address gender, sexuality, and teen mental and emotional health the pressing problem that it is.

This address to OVPES coincides with the centennial of Walter Lippman's book *Public Opinion*, which, along with Lippman's 1925 book *The Phantom Public*, inspired John Dewey's counterarguments in *The Public and its Problems*. In *Public Opinion*, Lippman takes up precisely the sort of problem the politicized HB1557 brouhaha represents: the tendency of mass media, now including social media, to create what Lippman calls a "pseudo-environment," which is to say not an accurate picture of reality but a fabricated one. *Public Opinion* addresses the basis on which citizens give their consent to decisions in representative democracies. Leaders, Lippman argues, have always manipulated consent by means of symbols (the flag, the cross, the crown). In part, this is done through the connection of lower-order symbols, including stereotypes and scapegoats (welfare queens, socialists, Jews with space lasers), to those higher-order ones. Drag queens are unamerican, therefore vote for me; that kind of thing. That process is at work in HB1557's scapegoating of school boards and teachers, which it presents as at odds with parents' "*rights*," which have come to symbolize American *freedom*, and thus *America*, in contemporary political rhetoric. "Many aspects of our subjection to symbols are not flattering," writes Lippman, "if we choose to think of ourselves as realistic, self-sufficient, and self-governing personalities. *Yet it is impossible to conclude that symbols are the work of the devil.* In the realm of science and contemplation they are undoubtedly the tempter himself. But in the world of action, they may be beneficent, and are sometimes a necessity."¹³ Lippman acknowledges that moments calling for quick action can be fabricated but also that sometimes the need for quick action, without time to know everything one wishes to know, is real.

Lippman's conclusion, which he further elaborates in *The Phantom Public*, is that only elites, those engaged in "science and contemplation," are capable of acquiring the knowledge needed to make wise decisions, given the complexity of the modern world and the proliferation of information and misinformation. Decisions, Lippman argues, need to be in the hands of the knowledgeable as they are the only ones capable of avoiding devilish manipulation by symbols. It is this conclusion that Dewey challenges in *The Public and its Problems*. Dewey's argument rests on a different understanding of knowledge and its relation to action. "That within limits those successful in

¹³ Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1997), 236. Emphasis added.

affairs have knowledge and skills is not to be doubted,” he writes. “But such knowledge goes relatively little further than that of the competent skilled operator who manages a machine. It suffices to employ the conditions which are before him. Skill enables him to turn the flux of events this way or that in his own neighborhood. It gives him no control of the flux.”¹⁴ Like a sawmill operator who controls the mill’s machinery (but not the growth of trees nor the river, themselves subject to the complex flux of ecosystems and climate), in Dewey’s metaphor elites have limited knowledge that applies only insofar as conditions remain the same. Furthermore, “[a] class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all.” Because “[t]he man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied,” decisions cannot be left to experts.

In calls for respecting expertise and criticisms of all “parents’ rights” rhetoric, the progressive left often leans towards assigning education policy makers, or perhaps teachers (and there are, of course, debates about which of these groups knows best), the authority to decide “who we ought to become” by means of education, including education as it extends to the formation of sexual desire and gender identity. I use “progressive” here in its sense of willingness to use state authority to create policies deemed just and equitable, in contrast with the liberal left that has more hesitations about state interventions in private life. Yet rule by the enlightened is a dangerous path, especially when there is only a fog of uncertainty. Better policies are likely to come through what Dewey calls social inquiry, which is to say, education, which is to say democracy. Who we ought to become is a political question, not a technical one. This is one thing HB1557, for all its ugliness, gets right: parents ought to be included in conversations with professional educators about who we are, who we want to become, and how we might best get there. Broadly, this entails a collective conversation about the education of diverse children and youth in a pluralistic democracy. Narrowly, it entails conversations about the physical, mental and emotional health of particular teenagers (again, as HB1557 stipulates, unless this puts the safety of the child at risk.) This requires, however, that all concerned let go of any illusions of “control.” There is no control of the flux.

THE RIGHTS WAY IS THE WRONG WAY

HB1557 grabbed my attention in part because it spoke to a frustration I feel after 15 years of teaching pre-service teachers while raising my own children. I have spent many hours with novice teachers, many of them lit by the fires of social justice, certain that *they* will enter classrooms possessed of insight that parents lack. (Life at 20 can still be a John Hughes movie: the adults are idiots, but the kids are all right. To be fair, I don’t know how anyone young could face their future without that confidence.) Simultaneously, I have spent many hours with parents, tempered by the harsh realities of child-rearing, with

¹⁴ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1927), 166.

comparably dismissive attitudes towards teachers. I am frustrated with both, and worst of all I am now old enough to have had the experience of encountering 23-year-old teachers on fire with idealism as teachers of my children, just a few months after they expressed their disdain for parents in my philosophy of education classroom. This harmful divide has a long history in the United States, and it is visibly at play both in HB1557 and in reactions to it. The divide widens, I would argue, when it is articulated in the language of *rights*.

In *How Rights Went Wrong*, constitutional law scholar Jamal Greene argues that twentieth-century courts reinterpreted rights in a way that addressed significant injustices, namely the denial of civil rights to Black Americans, but also created new ones. In the US, unlike other peer democracies, rights are treated as absolute; to have a right, is to have it maximally. In decisions about rights, US courts practice *discrimination*: either one party has rights or the other does. Women or fetuses. Gun owners or districts looking to regulate guns. Christian bakers or gay men looking to buy a wedding cake. This “modern approach to rights,” Greene argues, “encourages not just the parties but also the rest of us to tie our opponents’ claims to the most extreme possible position.” In the case of Jack Phillips, the Colorado baker in the first wedding cake case, Phillips and the couple “actually agreed on a surprising amount. They agreed that it would be illegal under state law for the baker to refuse service to a gay couple, for religious or other reasons, based on their sexual orientation. They also agreed that a professional baker need not sell his wares to all comers.”¹⁵ An idealization of rights, which Greene calls “rightsism,” sidelines these points of commonality and exacerbates conflict. “Treating a rights conflict as a question of who has rights and who doesn’t degrades our relationship to the law and to each other. By denying the loser any claim of rights, the court tells him not just that he has lost but that *he does not matter*.”¹⁶ This, in turn, degrades the relationship between the loser of the case and the law. “Although the loser’s interests and projects remain important—perhaps even essential—to him, he is made an outsider to the law.”¹⁷

The alternative approach to rights that Greene favors (and other democracies practice) is *mediation*, which recognizes that both sides may have rights and the task of courts is to mediate between them. As an example, Greene offers abortion law as decided in West Germany in 1975, which treated *both* women *and* the unborn as having rights. As a result, abortion is permitted in the first trimester and later in exceptional cases and the state has the responsibility to provide prenatal care, maternity leave, and other services for women and children. Abortion is less controversial in Germany and (even before Roe was overturned) was more available than in many parts of the US, and women and children are better served.

¹⁵ Jamal Greene, *How Rights Went Wrong* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2022), pxxxiii

¹⁶ Greene, *How Rights Went Wrong*, xxxii.

¹⁷ Greene xxxii

Mediation, Greene argues, has another sanguine effect: it limits the power of (unelected) judges and keeps power in the hands of legislative bodies and juries, where, in his account, the Framers of the Constitution meant it to be. For Greene, the challenge of the twenty-first century is to return decision-making authority to the people *while also* overcoming the Constitution's presumption that the citizens whose power it preserves were exclusively white male heads of household. That challenge, he maintains, cannot be addressed by judges in the grip of rightsism. Greene's read of US history is (small r) republican in the sense endorsed by Michael Sandel, rooted in Rousseau and Machiavelli: an understanding of democratic self-governance as based not on individualistic, negative freedoms but instead on a community-based, positive freedom expressed through democratic self-government.

Most rights conflicts in the US, Greene argues, do not fit neatly into the discrimination model of adjudication. Decisions by school boards to restrict reading material in school libraries, for instance the restriction across Florida of LGBTQ-friendly texts, make a great example. Do parents have a right to limit the media, including books, to which their children are exposed? Yes, and they—like educators—do this all the time. Do children have a right to encounter ideas, including ideas expressed via (frequently banned) books like *I am Jazz* or *All Boys Aren't Blue*, that promote respectful awareness of a range of human possibilities of becoming? Also yes. The question is not *which* right to support but how to mediate them. Initial responses to the *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization* case support Greene's case that foregoing rights absolutism will not necessarily lead straight to oppression. In Kansas, for instance—hardly a left-leaning bastion—voters rejected by a significant margin a referendum that would have amended the state constitution to explicitly deny women all abortion rights. For the people of Kansas, the creation of laws that reflect their views is now a possibility. Polls indicate that most Americans hold nuanced views of abortion, recognizing the importance of context, the value of unborn life, and women's right to bodily integrity. In multiple states, women and their allies have been turning out to keep laws reflecting those nuanced views in the hands of elected legislatures. Mediation, Greene's favored approach, would come in as any such laws, and with them the rights they did and did not uphold, were challenged in the courts.

With its declaration of strong parent rights and gag order on K-3 teachers, HB1557 ups the ante. Our tendency to "rightsism," however, had already set up two divided camps in the popular imagination: parents and teachers. What those camps "symbolize"—to use Lippman's term—varies. In the populist view (which can be heard on the right and the left), teachers represent an educated elite that has monopolized state power and is using it via school policy to intervene in family life, whereas parents represent ordinary citizens raising the kids they know best. In the technocratic (mostly left-leaning) view, teachers represent the progressive vanguard defending LGBTQ rights, whereas parents—*other* parents at least, those presumed to support laws like HB1557—represent the socially regressive undercurrent of America that refuses

to accept diversity, equity and inclusion. This is where I wish the clock would strike midnight and all the illusions disappear. Teachers and parents are, by and large, ordinary Americans struggling to do right by kids they care about, without the social and material supports they need, in the face of a teen mental health crisis, on the lawless frontiers of social media, in the throes of ecological crisis and pandemic and rampant gun violence and economic precarity. They are members of the same, or neighboring, communities, voting in the same school board elections. There are better ways to figure out how teenagers can fulfill their heart's desire, and what that even is, than by turning it into a battle of rights fought over in terms of symbols, stereotypes and scapegoats.

Since I started with fairy tales, I'll end with one too. In the face of Florida's restrictive new laws on gender and sexuality, Ember's dad gets a new job and moves the family from Orlando to fairyland. There, the family finds classrooms that encourage talk about sexuality and gender identity. Teacher education programs and professional development educate pre-service and in-service teachers to have those conversations, eschewing simplified "best practices" and instead fostering an understanding of gender as a lifelong project of becoming and changing in a world in flux, a complex stew of interpersonal relations and social expectations and never-complete self-knowledge. Teachers and parents alike recognize that there is no control of the flux, yet at the same time they diligently defend the right to take part in ongoing conversations and decisions about how we ought to live together, in all our diversity, through democratic processes. Those processes include the election of school boards, whose decisions respond to the local community that elected them as well as to the needs of teachers and students. Courts have a role, but that role is fulfilled as Greene suggests, by mediating when conflicting rights are at stake, always with an eye to the right that underpins all the rest: the right of all to take part in deciding the terms in which we live together. In this new environment, Ember spends a lot less time on social media, especially after he starts dating this great girl he meets. Rapunzel and Ember go to the prom together, and I'm not even going to tell you what they're each wearing, except that it was spun by hummingbirds out of magical spiderwebs. By midnight, everyone has taken their shoes off and they dance till dawn because teenagers can do amazing things if adults set the world up right for them.

RESPONSE TO PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

MANICHEAN POLITICS, CULTURAL PLURALISM, AND FEAR

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In her typical snappy style, Amy Shuffelton delivers an essay combining many of the features which characterize her corpus, qualities of thought and expression that have made her a powerful figure in educational philosophy today. Exploring the antics of Cinderella, Ember, and Ron DeSantis, she uses the literary imagination to analyze parent-child fantasies, using these to explore the just-as-fantastical scenes from contemporary educational politics. Amy uses her philosophical chops to deftly draw upon traditions in ethics, politics, and logic. As a scholar of educational politics, democratic education, and parent-school political tensions, she uses a close reading of Florida's "don't say gay" legislation to point to the need for social inquiry and deliberation about issues of contemporary gender and sexual identification among youth.

Among Shuffelton's many gifts are philosophical and political courage, so I was not surprised to see her take a stance that shouldn't be controversial but likely may be understood to be, by some. In drawing on social science literatures regarding the explosions of non-binary identification among youth, Amy opens a door to exploring "what we don't know" about this present moment. We are all living in a great cultural experiment, in which our children spend large quantities of time relating to friends and many others, including vast numbers of strangers, bots, commercial predators and a few real-life predators, through their electronic devices. Rather than simply condemning DeSantis and his supporters for their small-mindedness, she presents the idea, without directly saying so, that some of these supporters' worries may have a certain kind of legitimacy. She suggests that there might be a relationship between the sexual and gender identity work of youth, and social media cultures, uses, and conditions. She suggests, more powerfully, that ideologically-driven inquiry (and, ideologically-driven absence thereof) isn't helpful to address the questions that many parents and educators are facing. Amy critiques both right and left political and social commentators when she suggests that, rather than trying to *control* ways in which young people sex and gender themselves, that we must *deliberate* to better understand the present social context. These deliberations must include a free inquiry into biological, sociological, and other realms related to youth development and well-being, that ought to be taken up without fear of attack. Amy argues that teachers, parents, students, scholars, and policymakers must engage in social inquiry to understand how communities and schools ought best respond to this moment of uncertainty, in order to create conditions that respect kids, their development and mental health, as well as their families.

My response will extend and play with some of Amy's argument, attempting to enrich her essay's political analysis of the Manichean politics of the era, and ways populist politicians use dualisms, and fear, to govern schooling. Dualisms do, however, subtly find their way into Amy's own argument, when she suggests that we have a choice of either trying to control, or merely try to deliberate about, the present uncertain conditions regarding youth sexual and gender identification. To trouble this dualism, I explore the nature of parental fear, the existential condition of all parents everywhere, to suggest areas of common ground that might foster better social inquiry.

MANICHEAN POLITICS

Chantal Mouffe explains that we live in a "populist moment."¹ Populist expressions employ a "we/they" logic that positions a formation of "the people" against "the elites" that govern them. In these formulations, "the people" is defined as the pure, unadulterated version of the *demos*, as opposed to the one imagined by elites. Populist politics and populist politicians have been occupying the attentions of many scholars around the globe. A growing body of research comments on populism's myriad forms, from authoritarian Christian nationalism in parts of Europe, to socialist democratic reformers in Chile, to anti-Critical Race Theory movements in U.S. school governance.²

Populism can be a valuable tool of dissent in democratic life, but when its language and Manichean politics infect governing, it can be used for illiberal and authoritarian ends. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis governs in the populist vein, as a political opportunist who has degrees from both Yale and Harvard. The Manichean politics of today's polarized society tend towards agonism, building on what might be "ancient human tendencies to demonize those outside one's own worlds, ...to see those outside 'imagined communities' of nationhood, ethnicity, religion, partisan politics and other differences in antagonistic ways."³ These are the words of Harry Boyte, political scholar and actual populist activist, who defines populism in a way that helps us understand its logic as a political, and *cultural*, expression:

Populism challenges not only concentrations of wealth and power, but also the culturally uprooted, individualized, rationalist thinking characteristic of professional systems, left

¹ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York, NY: Verso, 2019).

² Edda Sant, *Political Education in Times of Populism: Towards a Radical Democratic Education* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, England: Verso, 2007); Tjitske Akkerman, "Populism and Democracy: Challenge or Pathology?" *Acta Politica* 28 (2003): 147-159; Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563; Paris Aslanidis, "Major Directions in Populism Studies: Is There Room for Culture?" *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies* 13, no. 1 (2020): 59-82; W. Mazarella, "The Anthropology of Populism: Beyond the Liberal Settlement," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48 (2019): 45-60.

³ Harry Boyte, "Bringing Culture Back In," *The Good Society* 21, no. 2 (2012): 304.

and right. Populist movements are narrative. They grow from the sense that an elite is endangering the values, identities, and practices of a culturally constituted people, its memories, origins, and ways of life.⁴

Boyte notes that populism can devolve into a Manichean politics, a war-like formula that is based in the logic that “hatred and its close cousin, anger, are relatively uncomplicated emotions to manipulate.” (I will add one additional close cousin, fear, to that list.)

In our time of populism and Manichean politics, many of us are swept up in these cultural narratives of good versus evil, and similar dualistic ideological framings. Amy characterizes those who would support the Florida Parental Rights in Education Bill as endorsing “a bad faith attempt to intimidate teachers and school districts.”⁵ I would amend this claim, to suggest that not all supporters of these bills necessarily act in bad faith. Many of these parents are part of a social world comprised of a large “we” of families who view their cultural values as threatened by the “they” of public education. They live in a narrative, constructed by the present populist moment, in which their “ways of life” are threatened. They, like all of us, can now easily create media and social bubbles around these beliefs that protect them from serious challenge by facts or alternative viewpoints.

As a white person who grew up in the Southern U.S., 20 miles from Robert E Lee’s childhood home, I can tell you a little something about cultural narratives based on perceived threats to a way of life. Such narratives are powerful stories which constitute people deeply, yet partially, and nonrationally, too. Southern narratives surrounding the Confederacy are based on racism, so they are not morally ambiguous. But they are also based on culture, as they are claims about cultural difference and cultural rights, so they are not politically or sociologically simple or straightforward, either.

Given that we are caught up in a powerfully populist moment, where the we/they lines are being drawn around educational policy-making in the strongly emotivist language of populist expression, it is easy to conclude that there is a good-versus-evil battle afoot here. The cultural narratives of present conservative educational populism characterize public education officials as “social justice warriors” practicing “government overreach” and teaching “anti-American” ideas. The idea of this battle-for-our-nation’s soul gives the opponents of parental rights’ bills our moral energy, to fight for the rights of youth to freely and safely identify as GLBTQ persons. It is this *rights*-based battle that Shuffelton properly skewers in her argument.

To add to Shuffelton’s analysis, I want to suggest that there are also legitimate cultural battles playing out in these controversies. Conservative religious families, of various sects and stripes, are like most parents in that they

⁴ Boyte, “Bringing Culture Back In,” 300.

⁵ Amy Shuffelton, “The Hard Truth of Cinderella’s Gender Identity,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54 (2023).

are interested in their children taking up and inhabiting their cultural practices and beliefs; many of these families (still) attend public schools, despite the best efforts of politicians in Florida and my own state of Ohio. Without throwing the welfare and liberty rights of their GLBTQ kids, teachers or families under the bus, the cultural identities of conservative religious parents are worthy of consideration in deliberations about how schools handle gender and sexual identification. As Warnick argues, the rights of parents can be reasonably understood to include the right to invite them into their way of life and persuade them to adopt it as their own.⁶ Most of us accept this authority of parents as rooted in the good of cultural coherence between family and child. Between the individual child, and the social world, there is the domain of culture; parents are often the keepers of cultural knowledge, identities, and practices that are intended to nourish the child and continue a cultural way of life for those who value it. There are many conservative families who understand their activism against public schooling equity efforts using these cultural frameworks. For my own claim here, it is not so much that there are “good people on both sides” as it is an argument that when it comes to educational politics, it’s more productive to frame questions of our difference around questions of culture, and less around differences of ideology. This framing might cause limitations for Shuffelton’s vision, as she states, not necessarily unreasonably, that “in a pluralistic democracy, who we ought to be is also something we need to decide, at least in part, together, because we are relational beings who can only *become* who we ought to be insofar as others support that becoming.” While I agree with this statement, cultural pluralism might limit the possibilities on how far this idea might extend in realms of sexual and gender identity expressions in public education, at least in our present era.

I think humanizing would-be opponents in these ways, with generous though not uncritical characterizations of their interests and values, is an essential step towards getting past Manichean politics around school policies and laws. I think this complements Amy’s vision, and argument. Further, our Federalist system with its local public schools can provide endless opportunities to meet so-called opponents in good faith. Yet we can go even further towards finding common ground that might enable diverse parents to grapple with “what we don’t know” about gender and sexual identification practices among students today. We can go further, I think, if we talk about the elephant in the room called fear.

FEAR OF A QUEER CHILD

English and Stengel define fear as

commonly associated with uncomfortable feelings prompted by a (cognitive) *judgment* of (real or perceived) threat, feelings

⁶ Bryan Warnick, *Understanding Student Rights in Schools: Speech, Religion, and Privacy in Educational Settings* (New York, NY: Teacher College Press), 51.

viewed as instinctual in origin (that is, they constitute a specific affective repertoire linked to danger and built into the human organism), and assigned the power to stimulate physiological and behavioral responses.⁷

As English and Stengel note, fear is an expression based on feelings that can be hard-wired into our body-minds. People who parent are examples of humans who have this wiring instilled biologically, relationally, or culturally; whether it is actually “hard” in the essentialist, biological sense is irrelevant. What is consequential is the fact that raising a young human, vulnerable to harm in its long period from infancy to late adolescence, makes most parents familiar with fear as a normal experience. These are universal fears, in that the role of human parenting is partly based in protection of the life and well-being of the developing child.

There are common parenting fears that go beyond these general banalities. If you’re parenting a child whose social identity is perceived as a threat, as the Other, by those around them, you live in an additional layer of fear that goes well beyond normal parent anxiety. Parents of non-binary and trans kids know this fear acutely, as do the parents of African-American children, among others. It is the fear that your child may be fundamentally not safe in a normal public school, or even walking down a street in their own neighborhood. These fears are not normal and represent a grave harm to these children and their parents. That these fears have basis in the realities of schools and streets represents a moral failing of our public systems, and the urgency of correcting these harms is appropriately felt today by educators working on equity reforms in school districts.

Conservative religious families share some of these parenting fears, but they are fears of a different type. Many of these families are anxious about children failing to conform to gender and sexual identity roles which they understand to be fundamental to their religious traditions. These fears pertain less to the physical or mental safety of the child and more to family’s obedience to or respect for valued religious or cultural traditions. The traditional gender and sexual identities and roles embraced by many religious conservatives are in tremendous flux in the wider public cultures in most western societies. These fears of conservative parents present political opportunities for exploitation. The “politics of fear” has been waged by right-wing politicians for many generations, used most recently by the likes of DeSantis, and Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin, but also by political leaders who fought racial de-segregation of schools in the post-Brown v. Board era of massive resistance.

There is parental fear that comes out of the experience of rearing a small human that is perhaps universal, and there is parental fear based on your kid being a social target due to hatred and oppression. Parental fears are politically useful, but the fear of the queer child—the motivating force of “don’t say gay”

⁷ Andrea English and Barbara Stengel, “Exploring Fear: Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire on Fear and Learning,” *Educational Theory* 60, no 5 (2010): 522.

legislation—has its own genealogy. Part of our social inquiry related to parenting and fear must help us unpack the sedimented history and psychologies of these fears, in the same way that we must unpack the fear of racialized Others. In “Fear of a Queer Child,” Rosky states these include “the fears that exposing children to homosexuality and gender variance will make them more likely to develop homosexual desires, engage in homosexual acts, form homosexual relationships, deviate from traditional gender norms, or identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.”⁸ In his article, Rosky provides a historical look at this fear, pointing out that while it is thousands of years old, in the last half century, it has been subtly transforme from a fear of seduction of children by homosexuals, to “fear of indoctrination, role-modeling, and public approval.” He notes that “the public approval fear is that by granting equal rights to LGBT people, the government will teach children that queerness is acceptable—an ‘alternative lifestyle’ that children should feel free to adopt.”⁹

To the delight of progressives and leftists, but to the dismay of many social conservatives, we are in full swing of what could be a successful fight for that public approval. The schools are, as they have always been, a place where social, political, and moral battles are fought. Rosky rightly states that “the state must adopt a neutral position vis-à-vis children’s straightness and queerness, because it has no legitimate reason to presume that straightness is superior to queerness—neither in childhood, nor at any age.”¹⁰ Public educators in some regions of the country are moving towards this position, in policies, curriculum, and school cultures. We are a long way from wide-spread public approval, but schools are necessary steps toward this goal, but there are clear signs of progress, which is exactly why politicians are using the politics of fear, of the queer child, to set policy and win elections.

To say that parenting involves deep fears which can be politically manipulated is also to say that these fears might be used otherwise. We can face and explore these fears to choose more humane and moral conditions for education, amidst a cultural moment of uncertainty and flux. Parenting and fear are existentially intertwined. Some parents have good reason to have particular fears that their children are targets of exclusion, hatred, or violence. How might our public life generate opportunities for renewal by exploring these fears, what they mean, and the work that they do politically? How can communities examine the fears that have led to hatred and violence in their histories? How might common concerns around mental well-being, safety, and thriving, counter overly-narrow discursive framings of “my right to raise my child as I see fit”? How might GLBTQ and gender non-binary students, teachers, and parents be given opportunities to share their experiences with hate, violence, and exclusions in public schools? How might cultural conservatives be able to speak about their

⁸ Clifford J. Rosky, “Fear of the Queer Child,” *Buffalo Law Review* 61, no. 3 (2013): 609.

⁹ Rosky, “Fear of the Queer Child,” 609.

¹⁰ Rosky, 612.

fears, in ways that can be heard by those in public schools who do not share their religious commitments? How can students—whose views on these matters are regularly silenced and ignored—be allowed to speak about and inquire into their own gender and sexual identity work, play, and growth?

By describing parental fear as universally felt though not experienced by all parents in the same exact way, I am attempting to complicate Shuffelton's notion that our options are to *control* or *deliberate*. I think if we are honest, we must admit that child-rearing is a unique and sometimes comically absurd series of attempts to control one's child in a positive direction. Even the most liberal of parents want to control their kids; in the Deweyan view, they have an interest in shaping the direction of their energies and strivings. Admitting this, and maybe even seeing the comedy in these struggles, as Amy's essay so nicely models, is one pathway among many to finding ways to educational agreements that make sense for our kids, for the safety and flourishing of them all. As a mom of two queer kids, living in a richly pluralistic community whose numbers include religious conservatives, this is my fervent hope. Thanks to my friend and our president Amy Shuffelton, for helping all of us wrestle with such hopes, together.

PARENTAL RIGHTS LEGISLATION AS EROSION OF EPISTEMIC AGENCY

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Recent polling shows a marked increase in public distrust towards institutions and fellow citizens in the United States.¹ In this context of rising distrust and democratic crisis, teachers have not been exempt from public scrutiny.² Recent legislation in the United States targeting school curricula and classroom discourse reveal a mounting distrust within the context of public education. In fact, over the course of the past few years, an onslaught of parental rights bills have been introduced across the United States. Yet, parental rights bills have a long-standing history in the United States that originated in several landmark court cases.³ And, as Bryan Warnick notes, in the years between 1978 and 2005, a majority of important legal cases involving schools involved parents' rights in some way.⁴ Parents have long contested the role of schools in shaping the views and experiences of children and called into question the compulsory nature of public education.

In the current context, much of this legislation has emerged as resistance to the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools; forty-two states have introduced bills seeking to limit the teaching of historical content as it relates to sexism, ablism, racism, and other state sanctioned forms of oppression perpetuated throughout history.⁵ In addition, more than a dozen states have introduced legislation intended to restrict discussion of gender identity and sexuality in classrooms, frequently labelled "Don't Say Gay" bills.⁶ While these

¹ Lee Rainie and Andrew Perrin, "Key Findings about Americans' Declining Trust in Government and Each Other," *Pew Research Center*, July 22, 2019; "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2022," *Pew Research Center*, June 6, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/07/22/key-findings-about-americans-declining-trust-in-government-and-each-other/>

² Anna Merod, "As Public Trust in Teachers Declines, How Can Districts Turn the Tide?" *K-12 Dive*, December 2, 2021. <https://www.k12dive.com/news/as-public-trust-in-teachers-declines-how-can-districts-turn-the-tide/610837/>

³ Some widely discussed cases include *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education* in 1987 and *Wisconsin v. Yoder* in 1972.

⁴ Bryan Warnick, "Parental Authority over Education and the Right to Invite," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 53–71.

⁵ Sarah Schwartz, "Map: Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack," *Education Week*, Updated September 28, 2022. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>

⁶ Dustin Jones and Jonathan Franklin, "Not Just Florida. More than a Dozen States Propose So-Called 'Don't Say Gay' Bills," *NPR*, April 10, 2022.

bills explicitly aim to restrict the content of classroom discussions, seventeen state legislatures have also aimed to create greater “transparency” around what educators do in their classrooms through the introduction of “curriculum transparency bills” that require schools to publicly post instructional materials.⁷ These bills raise important questions about trust in the context of public education and classrooms as spaces of knowledge consumption and production.

Much of the philosophy of education literature regarding parental rights legislation has aimed to understand the nuanced relationship between the rights of parents and the rights of children.⁸ And while this is an important aspect of the philosophical debate, epistemic questions have been left undertheorized. As classrooms and schools are primarily places of learning, where students are often considered learners first, it is important to consider the epistemic dimensions present in the debate over parental rights.⁹ As students are fundamentally present within school contexts in order to learn important content and acquire social skills, it is pertinent to recognize that students enter classroom spaces as learners and knowers as their fundamental role within the school. Throughout the course of this paper, I aim to apply two lenses to the issue of parental rights bills and the challenge that they pose in epistemic spaces. First, I examine parental rights bills through the lens of epistemic agency. In doing so, I argue that parental rights bills intervene in epistemic spaces by stripping students of the epistemic agency required for appropriate development as believers and by limiting students’ ability to exercise their own agency over what they choose to believe. One way that I articulate this is through the lens of “pre-emptive silencing” as a facet of epistemic injustice.¹⁰ In addition, I apply the lens of epistemic authority to the issue and argue that parental rights legislation can be viewed as a challenge to schools’ epistemic authority insofar as it intervenes into the trusting relationship between teachers and their students. Moreover, I suggest that this dismantling of epistemic authority intervenes into the student-teacher relationship, which requires trust to flourish and, in turn, further infringes upon students’ development of epistemic agency. I conclude that parental rights bills perpetuate epistemic injustice against students in that they constrain which epistemic resources are made available to them and subsequently limit their flourishing as epistemic agents.

<https://www.npr.org/2022/04/10/1091543359/15-states-dont-say-gay-anti-transgender-bills>.

⁷ Laura Meckler, “New Transparency Bills Would Force Teachers to Post Instructional Materials,” *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/03/02/transparency-curriculum-teachers-parents-rights/>

⁸ For example, see Warnick, “Parental Authority over Education,” 53–71.

⁹ Monika Platz, “Trust Between Teacher and Student in Academic Education at School,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, no. 4–5 (2021): 688–697.

¹⁰ Jose Medina, “Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities,” *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 201–220.

RESTRICTIONS ON EPISTEMIC AGENCY AS EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Epistemologists have long debated the methods that subjects use in order to formulate beliefs, debating the moral, social, and epistemic dimensions of belief acquisition. Feminist epistemologists, in the past few decades, have driven discussions of how social practices and contexts impact belief formation and have examined the implications that social contexts have for the epistemic subject.¹¹ At the intersection of discussions regarding the moral and epistemic dimensions of belief acquisition is situated the complex concept of epistemic agency, which Kristie Dotson defines as “the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community in order to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources.”¹² This capacity for knowers to both utilize and reform epistemic resources has a meaningful impact on the development of subjects as knowers and also supports the development of knowers as agents.

As Eddin suggests, feminist epistemologists have developed a notion of epistemic agency that is uniquely social, noting: “Among others, Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1990), Helen Longino (1990), Heidi Grasswick (2004), and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (2012) have explored the idea that we inform ourselves by gearing into communal structures and arrangements that contribute concepts, standards of evidence, acceptable presuppositions, and opportunities for testimonial sharing of information and dialogic exploration and questioning.”¹³ This act of engaging in a communal structure as an exercise of epistemic agency serves as the basis for understanding how agency and action lead to success as an epistemic agent. Exercises of agency in an epistemic community can be described as a moral foundation for how we formulate beliefs and act as epistemic subjects among others. Eddin articulates this idea as such:

If the value of knowing is the value of exercising epistemic agency, then given the way human agency and human epistemic agency work, that’s going to be the value of participating in appropriate ways in social practices and structures and systems surrounding the acquisition, propagation, and mobilization of true beliefs. Feminist work both in social epistemology and on relational accounts of agency and autonomy connects the value of agency (epistemic and otherwise), and thus the value of knowledge, to participation in such practices and structures and systems.¹⁴

¹¹ For an example see Kristie Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 1 (2012): 24–44.

¹² Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale,” 24.

¹³ Aron Eddin, “Epistemic Agency and the Value of Knowledge and Belief,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 8, no. 1 (2022): 7.

¹⁴ Eddin, “Epistemic Agency,” 7.

This situates the locus of agency and value in the subject's ability to appropriately act within the social structure and community as well as the agent's ability to use their resources appropriately to formulate beliefs.

This model of epistemic agency can be mapped onto the context of the classroom where students navigate complex debates and epistemic ecosystems through the use of their own epistemic resources. Within the classroom, students encounter a variety of viewpoints, sources, and other epistemic subjects who offer different epistemic resources that they must navigate. A school's ability to foster this environment serves as an important aspect of its ability to offer appropriate learning opportunities for students. And further, the student's ability to navigate this environment successfully speaks to their own developing epistemic agency. In this way, we might consider the development of epistemic agency as a central feature of schooling itself. And subsequently, limitations of opportunities for students to develop their own epistemic agency might be viewed as both moral and epistemic failures on the part of the school system.

As epistemic agency is a key feature of knowledge acquisition, students who are limited in their ability to exercise agency in epistemic environments are harmed as agents. As described earlier in this section, when students navigate epistemic environments, they are required to engage in a variety of communal structures (contributing to concepts, sorting through standards of evidence, questioning and dialogue).¹⁵ One way that students develop agency within the communal structure of the classroom is through practice and modeling. Yet, the impetus behind parental rights bills is arguably to shield students from the exercise of epistemic agency in particular domains (for example, conversations around gender identities). Through the preemptive removal of epistemic resources from classroom environments, students are deprived of the opportunities required to exercise their own agency. This has detrimental impacts on the student and infringes upon their ability to develop as an agent. As Eddin suggests, individuals' agency is limited when they are unable to inform themselves in subjects that are relevant to them; this limitation can be viewed as a harm to the agent.¹⁶ This intentional removal of meaningful resources from students' learning environments is detrimental to the development of students' agency, especially when those resources center subjects that are especially meaningful for students (one might argue that this has the greatest impact on marginalized knowers who require access to those restricted resources in order to better understand their own positioning within classroom spaces). Removal of these resources, in particular, constitute an even greater harm to the student because they might be considered disruptive of identity formation.

Students are also harmed epistemically when they are deprived of the ability to exercise their own epistemic agency due to reduced opportunities and access to epistemic structures where they might formulate beliefs and opinions. This harm occurs in two ways. First, students are harmed through the erosion of

¹⁵ Eddin, "Epistemic Agency," 7.

¹⁶ Eddin, "12."

the teacher as an epistemic authority who is able to offer expertise in a particular domain. Next, they are harmed through the reduction of opportunities to access particular epistemic resources that may be critical to their development. For example, elimination of resources that offer information about developing racial, gender, and sexual identities denies students access to resources necessary to make meaning around their own lived experiences. As developing epistemic agents, students navigate through many different environments and are often required to determine which resources to employ based on social and contextual factors. When parents aim to restrict which epistemic resources a student encounters at school (often hoping to ensure that those resources encountered at school align with the resources offered in the home), students are deprived of the opportunity to exercise agency to navigate between different resources. In Eddin's terms, students are weakened when they are unable to inform themselves in relevant ways, limiting their abilities as epistemic agents.

Taken together, I argue, this limitation of students' epistemic agency on both moral and epistemic grounds is an epistemic injustice in the form of epistemic exclusion and silencing. According to Dotson, epistemic exclusion occurs when there "is an infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers that reduces her or his ability to participate in a given epistemic community."¹⁷ As argued earlier, parental rights bills intervene on which concepts and discussions can take place within classrooms thereby reducing knowers' ability to both access certain epistemic resources and develop appropriate epistemic agency. These two elements compound to result in limitations on students' ability to participate in the greater epistemic community (because they lack both the resources required to substantively engage and the requisite skills to navigate meaning making). This is especially problematic when it occurs in the school setting, given that schools serve the primary function in society of providing access to a variety of epistemic resources.¹⁸

As a result, I argue that parental rights bills constitute a type of socially produced silencing that Miranda Fricker labels "preemptive silencing," whereby individuals are "excluded in advance from participating in communicative exchanges."¹⁹ While this type of silencing has been generally described in the context of identity-based prejudicial treatment in the injustice literature, it is arguable here that students are excluded from these exchanges in virtue of their status as students (and perhaps their status as children). Parental rights bills engage in preemptive silencing when they predetermine which content must be excluded from classrooms through legislation, suggesting that particular lines of dialogue are off limits for particular people. This seems to highlight the reality

¹⁷ Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale," 24.

¹⁸ It is important to note here that I implicitly assert the benefits of a pluralistic epistemic environment where access to a variety of resources helps knowers exercise critical thinking and flourish. Due to space constraints within this essay, I am unable to offer a full account of the benefits of this pluralism.

¹⁹ Medina, "Hermeneutical Injustice," 202.

that parental rights bills are ultimately about the *exclusion* of particular epistemic resources rather than the *inclusion* of additional resources. This is harmful for students as it not only removes them from dialogue within the classroom, but also limits their ability to participate in broader conversations in society that are essential for democratic participation and citizenship. In addition, this poses a substantive challenge for schools, which are limited in which of the best possible epistemic resources they are able to make available to students.

Parental rights bills eliminate not only particular epistemic resources from the epistemic environment but intervene on the epistemic communal structure of the classroom through challenges to the epistemic authority of the teacher and school. In what follows, I examine the role of epistemic authority in the classroom and school context, analyzing how erosion of the trusting teacher-student relationship further contributes to the epistemic injustice students face.

CULTIVATING TRUST IN EPISTEMIC CONTEXTS

Theorized in social epistemology as an essential element in the transmission of knowledge in social settings, epistemic authority can be recognized as an important aspect of schooling and the development of students' epistemic agency. In educational psychology, social psychologists have long studied teachers as epistemic authorities, examining the impact that epistemic authority has over student acquisition of content in the classroom.²⁰ More recently, philosophers have expanded conversations around epistemic authority beyond the classroom walls to discussions of knowledge transmission and belief in everyday settings.²¹ For the purpose of this paper, I aim to focus in on teachers as epistemic authorities in terms of their role as transmitters of knowledge to students in the classroom as they serve an important role in the structuring and facilitation of students' epistemic environments.

Teachers require epistemic authority as credible sources of information in the classroom. As sources of knowledge and models for learning, students need to believe and trust their teachers to learn. To this effect, empirical studies have highlighted the link between successful learning outcomes and trust between students and their teachers.²² As a result, teachers have a multitude of important functions as epistemic authorities in their classrooms; they structure the epistemic environment through offering epistemic resources, facilitating testimonial sharing, and offering students acceptable standards of epistemic practice. Teachers also require respect and trust to serve communities and

²⁰ Amiram Raviv et al., "Teachers' Epistemic Authority: Perceptions of Students and Teachers," *Social Psychology of Education* 6 (2003):17–42.

²¹ It is worth noting here that although the concept of epistemic authority predates Zagzebski's 2012 book, I use the conception of epistemic authority outlined by Zagzebski; Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

²² Sook-Jeong Lee, "The Relations between the Student-Teacher Trust Relationship and School Success in the Case of Korean Middle Schools," *Educational Studies* 33, no. 2 (2007): 209–216.

schools. These features of epistemic authority are both called into question by parental rights bills that take aim at both teachers' cultivation and use of epistemic resources, but also trustworthiness as actors in the epistemic environment. In what follows, I examine the role of trust in the student-teacher relationship and the ways in which degradation of trust limits students' epistemic agency.

One important aspect of epistemic agency is determining which epistemic resources are worthy of integration into one's own belief systems. Within the context of a school, students are consistently faced with a number of different resources that they must navigate. It is often the teacher that serves in the role of supporting students as they navigate different resources and determine which resources they will employ. In order for this to occur, teachers and students must share a trustworthy relationship that allows the teacher to structure learning activities, provide students' feedback on their work, and support students in developing their critical thinking skills. This trust is, I think, partially developed through the epistemic authority that teachers' exercise in their professional roles. Yet, students do not have to automatically accept their teachers as authorities within the classroom. One aspect of students' own exercise of epistemic agency is determining which of the resources presented that they will consider worthy and accept.

As Platz highlights in her research on trust between students and teachers, trust is dependent upon the relationship between students and teachers (it is ultimately relational).²³ She argues that because of this, the trust between teacher and student is ultimately dependent upon the relationship that they have. In cases where parental rights' bills aim at diminishing teachers' epistemic authority in the eyes of students and the broader community one might argue that this intervenes upon the trusting relationship between students (and families) and teachers. By calling into question teacher's motivations and qualifications in selecting epistemic resources, parental rights bills challenge the teacher's epistemic authority and question whether or not teachers are worthy of trust in many ways. For example, the idea that teachers must be monitored consistently in their classroom practices suggests that there is already a distrusting relationship between teachers and the public.

Interventions into the trusting relationship between students and teachers poses a challenge to the teacher's ability to structure epistemic environments, which requires a trusting and open relationship where dialogue can flourish and epistemic resources can be shared. Calls for curriculum transparency and monitoring of teachers also questions the teacher as the source of epistemic standards; bills that ask teachers to post every assignment completed by students and restrict the content available to teachers seem to call into question the teacher's professional judgment and expertise. Teachers rely on trust in order to

²³ Monika Platz, "Trust Between Teacher and Student in Academic Education at School," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, no. 4-5 (202): 688–697.

facilitate testimonial sharing and dialogue within the classroom, to establish uniform standards of epistemic practice, and to help guide students towards epistemic resources that are better than others. Bills that call into question teacher decision-making on a larger scale, in part, intervene into the relationship between teachers and their students because they call into question the motivations and credibility of teachers. Parental rights bills operate under the implicit assumption that teachers have an alternative motivation outside of presenting a multitude of epistemic resources within a classroom (otherwise, why would we worry about the issue at all?). Casting teachers as untrustworthy or partisan precludes students from using their own epistemic agency to determine if the teacher is a worthy epistemic resource.

Yet, these bills also implicitly call into question the epistemic authority of the teachers and school institution. For many, I think, what seems to be at stake in the development of these bills is the teacher's potential to supplant the parent or other institution (church, for example) as a source of epistemic authority. In this way, parents reckon with the reality that within the school context students will face other adults who have been granted epistemic authority in virtue of their positioning as teacher and, therefore, have the possibility of conveying epistemic resources to students that might be accepted as an alternative to the parents' own epistemic resources. Yet, I would argue that formalized education inherently includes this transition away from the parent as a sole source of epistemic resources and towards a shared set of epistemic resources. As children develop as epistemic agents, they must look to a variety of sources as epistemic authorities and learn how to navigate between different, often conflicting, epistemic resources. Legislation that undermines an aspect of schooling that is both inherent to formalized education, but, also, a normal aspect of development for children undermines an essential component of students' epistemic agency.

It is also worth noting that there are many other factors at play in this contemporary dilemma than those I've outlined here. I have chosen to center my analysis around the epistemic dimension of this issue, but there are many other considerations around the dangers of epistemic authority in schools that cannot be ignored. For one, it seems clear to me that these bills are a manifestation of the distrust I noted in the introduction to this paper. Parents within the context of a polarized and distrusting society worry that the other epistemic authorities in their child's life may use the role of authority to engage in indoctrination rather than education.²⁴ This worry is not a new one; worries about indoctrination have been discussed in philosophy of education at length. However, parental rights bills are unique in that they take aim more broadly to not only constrain the

²⁴ The problem of indoctrination has a long history in philosophy of education. For example, see the chapter on Indoctrination in John Kleinig, *Philosophical Issues in Education* (Routledge, 1982). I do not have the space within this paper to cover the issues raised by indoctrination in a substantive way but wanted to note that this seems to be the underlying concern for many parents in these debates.

teachers' ability to teach particular content (which they might deem indoctrination rather than education), but also call into question the trustworthiness of the teacher as a source of epistemic authority altogether.

This might also be a good place to raise the question of whether these bills pose a true challenge to schooling in a democracy. Shouldn't parents have the option to present their own epistemic resources that counter the school's when they feel that the school is teaching propaganda rather than truth? I think that there are some complexities and nuances worth bringing to bear on this question. First, I take one of the aims of schooling to be offering students a uniform set of what we consider our best current epistemic resources as well as the skills and epistemic practices required to navigate many different epistemic environments. In Kuhnian terms, the epistemic resources employed by schools have been cultivated through time and professional networks in various fields to be considered the current best paradigm.²⁵ Moreover, they have been scrutinized and adjusted by state and/or district curriculum teams as well as teacher teams themselves to present the current best resources. This, I think, is what allows us to grant the school institution (and, by proxy, teachers) epistemic authority and trust. The uniformity of shared epistemic resources is a part of what allows us to communicate with one another and fully participate in the democratic process; we share some common understanding and foundational knowledge. Limitations on either the uniformity of resources presented (e.g., in Massachusetts slavery is presented in accordance with our best epistemic resources that are traced to historical records, but in Texas slavery is presented as indentured servitude) or access to particular resources in some communities does impact our ability to deliberate together as citizens.

In addition, the ways in which we go about challenging the epistemic authority of the school and teacher have the potential to result in some substantial consequences for our school systems. If students are taught that teachers are partisan actors or parts of the bureaucratic machine that aim to indoctrinate them, then there will likely be an erosion of the foundational trust required for learning to happen. If we begin to intervene in teacher-student relationships in this way, then students may find that they no longer are willing to accept the teacher as an epistemic authority within the classroom at all. This is not to say that this is inherent when parents offer alternative epistemic resources or question the epistemic authority of the teacher or institution, but rather I'm suggesting that there are ways of questioning epistemic authority that ultimately do erode the trust students have for their teachers.

And lastly, there is one final item that I think is worth noting here: parents always have had and still do have the opportunity to offer alternative epistemic resources and epistemic authorities to their children. Sunday school, online classes and clubs, nightly story time, and numerous other venues offer parents

²⁵ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

the opportunity to present students with alternate epistemic resources that can either challenge or bolster those offered by public schooling. Done in careful and tactful ways, we can offer children many resources to choose from without inherently detracting from students' ability to exercise their own epistemic agency.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that parental rights bills, which have proliferated in the past few years, are a form of epistemic injustice that harm students through the limitation of students' epistemic agency. Because parental rights bills aim to constrain the content shared in classrooms, they limit which epistemic resources can be available to students, which forecloses the possibility of students utilizing their burgeoning epistemic agency within the school context. This limitation on which resources are available, I have argued, can be viewed as a form of preemptive silencing which demarcates which topics are available to students in virtue of their status as students. Further, I suggest that these bills pose an additional challenge to the structure and purpose of schooling by eroding the trusting relationship between students and their teachers. This, in turn, places further strain on students' epistemic agency insofar as it severely limits the number of epistemic resources and authorities available to students.

Education in a democracy requires dialogue, communication across difference, and the possibility that alternative epistemic resources exist. The regulation of classroom dialogue that erodes the schools' epistemic authority and the students' epistemic agency results in epistemic injustice that harms students as agents. While it might be uncomfortable for some parents to have their own epistemic resources challenged, the resulting epistemic injustice that results from preemptive silencing of students is not just harmful to our students but to our very way of life. Democracy can only flourish if its citizens are prepared to know and act within the context of civic life. Parental rights legislation denies students' the opportunity to gather valuable skills that enable important facets of civic engagement.

ON READING INTERVENTIONS, FLOURISHING, AND AN OPEN FUTURE: CONSIDERING CHILDREN'S PRESENT AND FUTURE FREEDOMS

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INTRODUCTION

Justice issues in early childhood education contexts abound; these include substandard developmental opportunities and resource inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. However, *interpersonal* justice matters are often underexplored in both conceptual and empirical scholarship. It is essential to prioritize how children's voices and views of justice are engaged in their educational environments, alongside questions of which communities' views and values are endorsed.

This article focuses on US reading intervention programs, where efforts are made to expand freedoms and develop literacy as a pathway to greater autonomy. However, the assumption of a child's heteronomy often perpetuates established patterns of interpersonal and systemic racial/economic hierarchy, power, and privilege. To better understand justice requirements for children in these programs, the authors introduce the cases of Adriana, Jason, and Gisela (pseudonyms)—all participants in case studies of young children's motivation to read in mandated reading intervention programs.

Adriana and Gisela were learning English as an additional language, while Jason lived in subsidized housing with his grandparents. All three children, representing diverse backgrounds often underexplored in the literature, maintained that they would opt out of their pull-out reading intervention programs if given the choice, with a common theme between them of frustration related to limitations placed on their self-governance. This motivates the question: *Do present constraints on children's freedoms within reading interventions interfere with their developing capacities for freedom and impact their flourishing?* On our view, it is essential to balance the recognition of children's present freedoms with the protection of their future freedoms by involving them and their families in program design and modifications.

The normative analysis exploring these questions employs Brighouse et. al's "educational goods" framework to offer an account of flourishing as a central aim in educational justice projects.¹ Additionally, we reference

¹ Harry Brighouse et al., *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision Making* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Feinberg's work on "the child's right to an open future" to consider present-oriented and future-looking considerations of justice specific to children like Adriana, Jason, and Gisela and to the field of early childhood education, more broadly.² The children's accounts examined within this article suggest that their intervention programs may undermine their developing capacities for autonomy and violate their rights to an open future, specifically as related to an appreciation for reading.

NORMATIVE CONCEPTS

Flourishing

One of the fundamental responsibilities of schools according to Brighouse and others is to support the long-term flourishing of students.³ Similarly, Tillson argues that the individuals who are responsible for making sure children's wellbeing does not fall below a threshold of adequacy are those persons best positioned to prevent that failing; a reasonable interpretation of this position suggests certain school faculty and staff (e.g., those working closely with students) have a considerable degree of moral responsibility to support the flourishing of those children they serve.⁴ Additionally, Tillson maintains that the broader community has some moral responsibility to support the creation and maintenance of multiple caring professions that promote the wellbeing of children. Following these insights, we recognize that, *inter alia*, individual relationships (i.e., faculty and staff), local institutions (i.e., schools), and policy infrastructures (i.e., created and maintained conditions within which caring professions operate) are interrelated contexts that might promote (or hinder) student flourishing.

Brighouse describes a flourishing life as one that mainly goes well for the individual.⁵ Tillson identifies being able to make choices that direct one's life towards good outcomes as a requisite for living a good life.⁶ DeNicola argues that communal engagement is required to gain an awareness of a variety of options for existing in the world.⁷ Though a good life can be realized in an infinite number of ways, we highlight two strong criteria:

1. One should deeply identify with the life they are leading.
2. One should obtain key objective goods.⁸

² Joel Feinberg, "The Child's Right to an Open Future," in *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 76–97.

³ Harry Brighouse, "Moral and political aims of education," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel (Oxford University Press, 2012), 35–51; Daniel DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish: A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education* (Bloomsbury Press, 2018).

⁴ John Tillson, *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* (Bloomsbury Press, 2019).

⁵ Brighouse, *Moral and Political aims of Education*.

⁶ Tillson, *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence*.

⁷ DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*.

⁸ Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (Routledge, 2006).

Here, we focus on one desirable “objective good” often listed in these and similar contexts, namely, students’ developing capacities for autonomy. Though we recognize that the definition is not settled, for the purposes of this project, we describe autonomy as one’s evolving ability to make informed choices to better one’s life. Autonomy supports individuals in selecting and engaging in “activities and relationships that reflect their sense of who they are and what matters to them.”⁹ Put differently, autonomy can be described as steering one’s life towards one’s core values and goals. The ability to make informed choices can support a person in identifying with the life they are living and promote a sense of inner coherence.

For example, many regard being able to properly execute foundational code-based reading skills (e.g., automatic word reading, prosody, etc.) as primary determinants of one’s future freedoms and, therefore, believe a narrow set of foundational reading skills should be prioritized in the early years, over other reading-related skills and approaches to meaningfully engaging with a range of texts types (e.g., digital, audio, etc.). Though we sympathize with the view that all children have a right to a basic level of code-based reading proficiency, and we acknowledge the role of evidence-based practices in facilitating foundational skill acquisition, we question the potential messages expressed to children by the narrow view of reading privileged in US schools and specifically in “remedial” reading intervention programs which tend to be dominated by packaged approaches to simplified views of reading and reading instruction.

Readers from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds engage in a variety of forms of reading and employ reading for a variety of purposes. Readers read digital texts, visual images, sounds, and dramatic interpretations, for example. Readers read for pleasure, relaxation, and restoration. They read to connect to spiritual and/or natural worlds, and to gain new information and perspectives. Various forms of reading and purposes for reading assist different people in navigating their world, their fellows, and themselves. A deep knowledge of a range of ways to engage in reading, multiple purposes for reading, and benefits associated with reading is needed to make more autonomous choices about whether and how to employ reading in personally meaningful ways—to identify with the life one is leading. We are not suggesting that children should acquire this depth of knowledge by the end of early childhood; however, we are concerned about the ways in which children might narrowly understand their possible relationship to reading given the oversimplified view of reading privileged within many US schools. Until their capacities for autonomous thinking have further developed, children should be guided in their introduction to and selection of ways of engaging with reading that complement their individual personalities and cultural ways of knowing and being.

⁹ Brighthouse et al., *Educational Goods*, 24.

Though children's present capacities for autonomy may not be developed enough to make reasonable decisions about whether to participate in school reading initiatives, research suggests they can and should be encouraged to set goals for themselves and offer feedback about what they believe to be motivating and/or demotivating about specific reading programs.¹⁰ As such, it seems important to consistently support children in recognizing and articulating their goals and views and also in acting upon them as a means of encouraging, practicing, and building their budding capacities for autonomy. Schools, and reading programs specifically, can offer guided opportunities for students to practice setting personally meaningful goals, provide feedback on programs, and make informed choices related to their individual reading journeys. Such opportunities offer students an array of potential options to employ when reading—options that can be filtered to align with their evolving personal and cultural goals and values. By introducing children to a wide variety of ways to engage with reading, educators might better honor the personhood of individual students, support their developing capacities for autonomy, and, by so doing, promote their flourishing.

An Open Future

According to Feinberg's account of autonomy, children are not yet fully autonomous, but someday will become autonomous; as such, they have a right to an open future.¹¹ On Feinberg's account, this is a right to sufficient opportunities to exercise their autonomy rights in the future. Though children cannot exercise their autonomy rights in childhood, argues Feinberg, they still possess latent autonomy rights that must be protected in order to keep the child's prospects open for their future autonomous choices. That is, those adults who care for children ought to protect and preserve these latent autonomy rights so that these rights can be exercised by the child in adulthood. According to Feinberg, adults must protect these latent rights, even against the damage that children might inadvertently visit upon their own future exercise of these rights. Crucially important for Feinberg's view is that, even when it might seem that an adult is limiting the freely chosen actions of a child, the adult might be justifiably limiting the potential damage the child may be doing to their own future right to autonomous choices.

We accept the broad appeal of Feinberg's arguments and note that his analyses often seem to undergird much contemporary thinking about children's rights; still, we meaningfully complicate the picture he presents. First, we suggest that his conceptual division between the present developing child and the future fully autonomous adult is less helpful than it might appear. Namely,

¹⁰ D. H. Schunk, "Self-efficacy for reading and writing: Influence of modeling, goal setting, and self-evaluation," *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2003): 159–172; Joy Dangora Erickson "Young children's perceptions of a reading intervention: A longitudinal case study of motivation and engagement," *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2023): 120–136.

¹¹ Feinberg, "The Child's Right to an Open Future."

Feinberg analyzes this developmental point as though it entails the moral conclusions at the core of the work. While we acknowledge that brain processes certainly appear to develop over the course of childhood and the transition to adulthood, this is a rather different matter than the assertion of moral rights that is often associated with observation of these patterns.¹² More nuanced normative argumentation closely wedded to those empirical data is necessary to conclude that these developmental points have the moral significance necessary for allocating rights amongst persons.

Second, while Feinberg observes that adults might justifiably limit the present choices of children in order to preserve their ability to make autonomous choices in the future, the argument is insufficiently attentive to the social locations of the actors in that exchange. For example, more nuanced analyses may be needed when the ‘adult’ and ‘child’ are members of hierarchically arranged social groups. A school full of well-intentioned white teachers limiting the choices of students of color may, in the aggregate, communicate to those children enduring lessons about their potential autonomy in the face of similar authority figures.¹³ In real world circumstances (marked by race, gender, class, dis/ability, etc.), adult restrictions on children’s actions might purport to pursue outcomes supportive of an individual’s future exercise of autonomy rights, while also reinforcing the structures that frustrate a community’s practice of the very same. Complex matters of individual, institutional, and community-sensitive trade-offs will likely need to be navigated in these moments.

In our work, we turn these considerations to reading intervention programs. Specific to US reading intervention programs, the education system, and its endorsed ideas about what constitutes reading, arguably pressures children from non-dominant cultural backgrounds to conform to the demands of a heavily scripted, teacher-centered, reading curriculum. Many US reading intervention programs make use of a pull-out model that forces children to leave their general education classroom to receive remedial reading instruction. Additionally, US reading intervention programs typically require dual language learners to read and write only in English despite ample evidence suggesting they develop code-based proficiencies best when taught to decode both in their home language and English.¹⁴ Finally, packaged reading intervention programs afford children very little control over the flow of the intervention and the materials employed; children are told what to do and when to do it. These practices arguably promote a message that children should uncritically obey the program and educator in charge of delivering it.

¹² Lucy Wallis, “Is 25 the new cut-off point for adulthood?,” *BBC News*, September 23, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24173194>.

¹³ Sigal Ben-Porath, “Deferring virtue: The new management of students and the civic role of schools,” *Theory and Research in Education* 11, no. 2 (2013): 111-128.

¹⁴ For a review, see L. M. López & M. M. Páez, *Teaching dual language learners: What early childhood educators need to know* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2021).

Given the associated outcomes, one might believe that the future-oriented right to be a proficient reader (in the narrow sense) is worth protecting. As such, it might seem justifiable, *a la* Feinberg, that many young children are not offered a choice in whether or not to attend school reading intervention programs. Perhaps children should be protected against their own self-damaging actions as related to the importance of literacy. However, children can and do choose, at least to some extent, the degree to which they actively engage in these programs—the effort they exert is at least partially within their control. Programming that is misaligned with children’s individual interests, ways of thinking, and ways of being can result in them resisting such programming or specific components of it. In this case, their developing reading proficiency and their motivation to read are likely to suffer—potentially threatening both their present and future freedoms.

If schools have responsibilities to promote children’s developing capacities for autonomy and flourishing, and to protect their future rights to read, perhaps they should seriously consider children’s *motivations* for school programming and make changes with them and in reference to the broader institutional and social realities impacting them. By failing to do so, they risk feeding into established systems of oppression that strip children of their fundamental moral rights. Later in this article, we build on this philosophical analysis to explicitly advocate for regularly eliciting children’s feedback on school reading programs and working with children to make changes that sustain their cultures and maximize their freedoms in the present and carefully considered future—we do this in response to empirical data from three case studies examining young Adriana, Jason, and Gisela’s motivation for doing reading within their mandated reading intervention programs.

EMPIRICAL METHODS

Context

The three children (two girls, one boy) were selected from the first author’s case studies on young children’s motivation for reading intervention in public schools in the Northeastern United States. The schools primarily served white, monolingual, middle-class children, with a predominantly white faculty and staff. All reading interventionists working with children were identified as white, monolingual, females. Two children were selected as district-designated ELs who reported not wanting to participate in English reading intervention programs. The third monolingual child was chosen because of indicating disinterest in the intervention and having a lower socioeconomic status and different family structure. These three children were not considered mainstream students by their schools or districts. The girls received Scott Foresman Early Reading Intervention, and the boy received Foundations Intervention with connected text. Refer to Table 1 for participant demographics.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Data

Name	Grade	Sex	First Language	ESL Instruction	Reading Intervention	Years in program
Adriana	2	F	Portuguese	Y	LLI & Foundations	2
Jason	1 & 2	M	English	N	LLI & Foundations	2
Gisela	K	F	German	N	ERI	1

Data and Analysis

Data was collected for each case over a semester. Adriana was studied during her second-grade year in 2018, Jason was followed for two years starting in first grade in 2018 and 2019, and Gisela participated in 2021 as a kindergarten student. The researcher functioned as a participant observer in all three cases, taking detailed field notes during a 4–8-week period while carefully watching, listening, and building relationships with the children. Two types of interviews—drawing and walking tour—were conducted with each child. Drawing interviews involved children drawing what they believed they did during reading intervention sessions and discussing aspects they readily recalled. During walking tour interviews, children were asked whether they would choose to attend reading intervention and then showed the researcher their intervention space, materials, and reading spots while discussing how much they enjoyed using intervention materials and participating in activities. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Multiple video recordings were made of each child during intervention sessions in the third and fourth months of the studies. Two videos per child were randomly selected for analysis, and video data was logged specific to children’s

behavioral engagement in the intervention. Analysis involved multiple rounds of coding and memo writing, with interviews being first coded for children’s perceived benefits and drawbacks of intervention participation. The coded excerpts were then reviewed to explore if they supported or constrained children from acting autonomously. Logged video data and field notes were reviewed to consider how the children’s behavioral engagement might be influenced by the factors they identified as constraining. Finally, individual narrative reports of students’ motivation for and engagement in the intervention were written.

FINDINGS

Below we discuss findings specific to each child. For an overview of findings across cases (the three children) including the students’ recommendations for intervention improvement, see Table 2.

Table 2
Overview of Findings

Name	Child’s Self-identified Problematic Constraints on Individual Freedoms	Ideas for Improvement	Alignment with Motivation Research
Adriana	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forced to leave classroom during free reading time• Could not choose books of high interest• Could not choose reading spot• Could not finish snack• Could not read independently for as long as desired	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be permitted to remain in the classroom• Be able to bring independent reading books from the classroom into the intervention• Choose own independent reading spot• Be able to finish snack in the intervention• Be permitted to read independently for longer periods of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increasing opportunities for students to make choices and exercise control over their learning supports motivation (Reeve et al., 2022)
Jason	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forced to read and engage in related activities that are challenging and uninteresting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not attend the intervention or be forced to read anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individuals for whom the perceived opportunity costs for engaging in an

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be permitted to participate in activities that interested him (e.g., beyblades, recess)	activity become to great may avoid the activity all together (Erickson, 2023)
Gisela	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forced to leave her friend behind in the classroom• Forced to engage in a round-robin style of reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be permitted to remain in the classroom and read with her friend• Be permitted to have her friend read with her in the intervention• Be permitted to read independently at own pace instead of in a round-robin style	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The cultivation of meaningful relationships and opportunities to socialize with peers support motivation (Reeve et al., 2022).• Round-robin style reading can lead to boredom and inattention (Opitz & Guccione, 2009).

Adriana

Adriana, a second-grade student, participated in a reading intervention program for 30 minutes, three times a week. The intervention focused on Foundations activities and Leveled Literacy Intervention books. During the intervention, Adriana had to give up her free choice reading time and snack time, which she found frustrating. She preferred her classroom because she could read any books of her choosing and eat her snack while sitting in her favorite spot. Adriana expressed her frustration in her drawing interview and mentioned that she didn't like the interventionist stopping her to do spelling. In her walking tour interview, Adriana said she would not attend the intervention if given a choice. Field notes and video logs showed her rolling her eyes when asked to put her snack away and regularly requesting to use the bathroom during word writing activities. Adriana resisted the structure of the intervention and suggested changes including having ample time to eat her snack, read independently, and a greater selection of books from which to choose.

Jason

Jason participated in two case studies exploring his motivation for reading intervention during his kindergarten and first-grade years. He received a similar intervention to Adriana, consisting of phonological awareness drills and reading-connected decodable texts. Jason initially enjoyed practicing letters and sounds during the intervention, but his behavior suggested he struggled with multiple intervention constraints. He tried to make his peers laugh during tasks, rejected certain materials, and demanded others. During his second year, his resistance became more apparent, and he expressed his “hate” for reading. He rejected the rules and routines in the intervention setting and the classroom,

likely in part due to difficult family issues. As permitting him to read books of personal interest may have offered him some peace, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that he could be better supported by being encouraged to exercise more autonomy over books and reading tasks.

Gisela

Gisela, a bilingual kindergartener who spoke German and English fluently, participated in a case study examining her motivation for an even more highly structured reading intervention. Despite being proficient in both languages, Gisela struggled to meet normed reading benchmarks and, as a result, was enrolled in a Scott Foresman Early Reading Intervention (ERI) for 30-minute sessions four times a week. During this time, her peers engaged in reading workshop or small group instruction. Like Adriana and Jason, Gisela spent most of her intervention time on phonological awareness drills and reading decodable texts.

In her interview, Gisela expressed a strong preference for reading in her classroom rather than attending the intervention. She perceived the intervention as preventing her from reading with her friend, who was a better reader and didn't need help. Gisela's reluctance to leave her classroom was also evident in her behavior, requiring multiple redirections and showing little enthusiasm for the intervention. On some occasions, she even requested to work on the research project with the researcher instead of attending the intervention.

Gisela also shared her dislike of the round-robin style of reading required in the intervention, saying she preferred reading at her own pace and with her friend. These suggestions reveal that Gisela was dissatisfied with the way her autonomy was constrained by the intervention.¹⁵ Overall, the case study suggests that Gisela's motivation for reading was negatively impacted by the intervention and that her preferences for reading with her friend and at her own pace should have been taken into consideration.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

School faculty and staff are entrusted with making decisions in support of children's present and future prospects. While educators are influenced by various agencies, they have considerable control over the instructional norms and routines they implement in the classroom. However, many packaged reading intervention programs do not provide opportunities for children to understand how reading might support their development, nor do they encourage informed reading-related choices. Teachers must modify these programs to better support their individual students.

The reading interventions that the three children described in this article attended appear to be largely unsupportive of their developing motivation to read; all three children indicated a preference not to participate in the required

¹⁵ M. F. Opitz & L. M. Guccione, *Comprehension and English language learners: 25 oral reading strategies that cross proficiency levels* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2009).

reading interventions. Children's autonomy to make decisions about their reading were heavily constrained within the interventions. Their individual interests, ways of knowing, and ways of being were largely neglected. As such, it is not a surprise that children's motivation for the interventions suffered; a large body of evidence indicates that an autonomy-supportive teaching style boosts motivation while more controlling styles erode it.¹⁶ Because their intervention experiences discouraged the children from reading in this context (and potentially beyond it), they stand to threaten the children's reading development in both the narrow and broader senses. Children who are not motivated to participate in their reading intervention programs are likely to gain less from them in terms of the advancement of targeted foundational skills, than if they were motivated to participate, setting the stage for a cycle of low English reading achievement. Additionally, children were not encouraged or introduced to reading for a variety of purposes in a variety of ways: they were primarily taught to crack the sound-symbol code to improve automaticity of word recognition. Despite arguably being in community with others as recommended by DeNicola, the children's reading interventions did not afford children knowledge of a variety of ways of engaging with reading from which they could select those that they might be interested; communal engagement may be necessary to introduce one to a variety of ways of engaging with text, but it does not guarantee it.¹⁷ As such, it is plausible that the children's reading interventions threaten both their present and future flourishing. As noted earlier, we agree with others who view the promotion of children's flourishing to be (1) a primary responsibility of schools and (2) a moral responsibility of those charged with their immediate care.¹⁸ Therefore, we find ourselves concerned by the potential for negative short- and long-term outcomes.

Additionally, we worry about the ways in which such programs threaten children's rights to open futures, perhaps suggesting that an alternative conceptualization of autonomy might be promising in determining valuable opportunities for young children. For such an account, we engage with the work of the late bell hooks.

The three children described above hold diverse backgrounds often underexplored in the literature and were initiated into an extremely narrow model of what it might mean to be a reader. Their white teachers and packaged intervention programs do not evidence consideration—or appreciation—of their cultural epistemologies and productions.¹⁹ They do not harness the power of

¹⁶ For a review, see J. Reeve & S. H. Cheon, "Autonomy-supportive teaching: Its malleability, benefits, and potential to improve educational practice," *Educational Psychologist* 56, no. 1 (2021): 54-77.

¹⁷ DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*.

¹⁸ Brighouse et al, *Educational Goods*; DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*; Tillson, *Children, Religion, and the Ethics of Influence*.

¹⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (Routledge, 1994).

children's own interests, goals, knowledge (e.g., home languages), or ways of being and knowing. These children were expected to conform to the demands of a mainstream reading intervention facilitated by a white, middle class, monolingual interventionist—potentially reinforcing messages of racial superiority and domination. Hidden reading intervention curricula arguably encourage culturally and linguistically diverse students to uncritically accept the ways these programs and the adults in power expect them to think and act—messages that could significantly interfere with the children's right to an open future in a broader sense. In a narrower sense, if the children's negative attitudes about reading specific to their intervention programs persist and/or expand to other contexts and/or experiences, each child's right to an open reading future may be compromised by resultant adopted or not adopted reading habits. If the children largely avoid reading altogether, their acquisition of foundational reading skills is likely to suffer, jeopardizing the very future prospects the interventions were intended to secure. Enlarging the range of considered views of autonomy, liberation, and criteria for personhood may be helpful here.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks argues for engaged pedagogy to support education as the practice of freedom.²⁰ She contends that for education to be liberatory and autonomy-supporting, teachers should connect learning to students' experiences. hooks contrasts her early Black education in the apartheid South, which resisted colonization, with her integrated education where obedience, not learning, was expected. Children like Adriana, Jason, and Gisela, with diverse cultural backgrounds, face assimilation into instructional norms that disregard their identities. Their interests and goals are not probed, nor are they integrated into their learning. While some argue that highly structured reading interventions will protect their reading futures, the potential costs to diverse learners, including reinforcing racial domination, overlooking their full personhood, and undermining motivation and proficiency, should be considered.

To mitigate these threats, educators and policy makers need to reimagine reading intervention programs, support children's flourishing, and promote their rights to open futures and present personhood. Educators must show a deep concern for each child's well-being, learn about students' individual ways of knowing and being by visiting their homes, attending extracurricular and social events, and using effective interview techniques. However, knowledge of children's multifaceted identities does not guarantee meaningful integration of content and pedagogy. Interventionists need to appreciate and utilize students' multifaceted identities, introduce them to various ways of engaging with reading, and increase opportunities for developing autonomy. They must recognize that learning about students and making instructional changes to meet their evolving identities and needs is an ongoing process. Regular feedback from students is necessary for a liberatory education.

Normative analyses of the empirical case studies suggest that children are experts of their lived experiences, and their identities and needs should

²⁰ hooks, *Teaching to transgress*.

inform educational practices. Such analyses suggest that children can be meaningfully understood as experts of their lived experiences and that, as others have carefully argued, their self-expressions may deserve to be taken seriously as legitimate commentary on their educational experiences.²¹ Adriana, Gisela, and Jason formed and articulated clear opinions about their reading instruction, and they offered ideas about how it could be improved. They pushed back against the ways they understood the interventions to be constraining their freedoms. Specifically, they resisted aspects of interventions each found intolerable: Gisela expressed disappointment about leaving her friend in the general education classroom and avoided round robin reading. Jason used humor, anger, and bathroom breaks to avoid participating in all aspects of intervention except independent reading tasks that aligned with his interests and goals. Adriana spoke out about having to leave her classroom and not being able to finish her snack and choose her own books and reading spot, and she employed avoidance tactics similar to Jason's to evade tasks she did not enjoy. Particularly noteworthy is that much of the children's feedback aligns with what research indicates supports or undermines reading motivation (see Table 2) and, in turn, achievement.²² For example, research clearly indicates that children's motivation is supported when they are able to exercise true choice over what they read. Research also demonstrates how close social connections with peers can enhance motivation to read. These three children appear far more capable of making informed choices about their reading engagement than many adults may think. They are well positioned to partner with their teachers to make informed instructional decisions—decisions potentially capable of nurturing their developing motivation, autonomy, and foundational reading skills. This is not to say that educators should omit any and all activities children express frustration with or disinterest in and adopt all they favor. It is to say that all children including young children and especially children with nondominant identity traits should be much more involved than they currently are in the design, implementation, and modification of their reading intervention programs.

CONCLUSION

We urge action based on our normative analyses of flourishing and the right to an open future in the context of empirical case studies of reading intervention programs. Prioritizing a narrow conception and application of reading science over the personhood of individuals served by reading intervention programs perpetuates injustices. Instead, individuals should be placed at the center of program design and modifications. Children should not

²¹ Ann Diller, "Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of One's Own Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steve Tozer (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1998), 1–9.

²² For a review, see J. T. Guthrie & A. Wigfield, "Literacy engagement and motivation: Rationale, research, teaching, and assessment," in *Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts*, eds. D. Lapp & D. Fisher (Routledge, 2017), 57–84.

be expected to conform to one-size-fits-all interpretations and applications of reading science, but, rather, reading science should serve the needs of each individual child. To achieve this, school policy makers, leaders, and educators must have a deep understanding of both the children they serve and reading science. They should involve children and families in the design, implementation, and modification of reading intervention programs in ways that recognize their current level of autonomy (broadly understood) and future potential.

LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT, METAPHYSICS, AND STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) (IDEIA) requires practitioners to use educational evaluations to assess students in K-12 schools that are suspected of having a disability. The resulting data provides the basis for determining whether students qualify for special education services, their precise educational needs, and the most appropriate plan to address those needs. This process culminates in the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and determining the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which to implement it.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) submits an annual report to Congress detailing special education service statistics. The most recent report (2021) showed that students with intellectual disabilities (SwID) had significantly less access to general education classrooms in comparison to other student populations. Furthermore, recent empirical scholarship shows that SwID demonstrate better learning and developmental outcomes when provided greater access to general education classrooms. These points suggest that despite being designed to provide access to appropriate education services, the IDEIA seems to achieve the opposite in practice by limiting SwID to accessing educational resources that confer less educational benefit.

This problem is produced by a liberal conception of the student (LCS) implicit within the IDEIA that establishes two truths that govern the determination of LRE for SwID. The first truth frames the student as a socially atomistic and rational being. The second truth frames the student as fully accessible to educational evaluations that measure individualized and rational forms of knowledge demonstration. Together, the LCS and the two truths that it establishes posit a metaphysics of the student that grounds the value of educational evaluations and legitimates their use for determining LRE.¹ As a result, SwID are provided less access to general education classrooms and their associated learning and developmental benefits. My analysis below will draw on select ontological themes in the work of American philosopher and educator John Dewey in arguing that a revised conception of the student may resolve this problem by altering criteria that IEP teams consider when determining LRE.

HISTORICAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT

The exclusion of SwID in American public education dates back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. During this time public education systems were

¹ The term metaphysics designates the character of the LCS as a concept that is both a priori and external to the educational processes that it governs.

beginning to take shape and the organization of students according to ability was an important early institutional concern.² For example, many school systems began organizing students by chronological age,³ as well as instituting separate schools and classes for children with mental retardation.⁴

For my purposes, the early history of American public education demonstrates two key points. First, public education systems and the exclusion of SwID developed in tandem. Historical evidence shows that institutional actors have long supported the exclusion of SwID both from and within public schools. Indeed, questions about whether SwID could benefit from instruction, how their presence might affect the learning of students without disabilities, and how their learning needs could burden teachers have often been raised to support separate placements.⁵ Early special education laws were often selectively enforced by school administrators,⁶ or were undermined by court rulings that supported the right of states to deny access to public education services.⁷ Second, the value and use of educational evaluations for the purposes of identifying and placing SwID in separate special education settings has been standard practice for well over a century. Specifically, intelligence tests have historically been used to justify the placement of SwID in separate classrooms. As early as 1913, Stanford-Binet intelligence tests accounted for 72 percent of all special education assessments, and over half of trained examiners were special education teachers.⁸ This history reveals that legal and educational mechanisms have traditionally been used to restrict access of SwID to general education resources and their associated benefits.

The IDEIA was one of two federal laws passed during the 1970s that established legal protections for children with disabilities ages 3-21. The right to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) regardless of disability status is the central substantive right established by the IDEIA.⁹ The provision of FAPE is implemented through a student's IEP and the associated evaluation process, which comprises the central procedural right established by the IDEIA.¹⁰ A vital part of IEP development is the determination of LRE that allows students with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers "to the maximum extent appropriate."¹¹ Determining the LRE requires IEP teams to identify the location(s) where special education services will be provided, identify the

² Robert Osgood, *History of Inclusion in the United States* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet Press, 2005), 23.

³ Osgood, *History*, 23.

⁴ James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 140.

⁵ Osgood, *History*, 23, 27-30.

⁶ Trent, *Inventing*, 142.

⁷ Mitchell Yell, *Law and Special Education* (New York, NY: Pearson, 2019), 37-38.

⁸ Trent, *Inventing*, 154.

⁹ IDEIA, § 1400 (d)(1)(a).

¹⁰ IDEIA, § 1412 (a)(4).

¹¹ IDEIA, § 1412 (a)(5)(A).

supplementary aids and services to be used, and explain why the student will not be included in general education settings for any portion of the school day.¹²

The LRE concept establishes the presumptive right of students with disabilities to be educated alongside students without disabilities.¹³ Furthermore, it establishes the expectation that public schools make good faith efforts to educate students with disabilities in general education settings through the use of supplementary aids and services.¹⁴ The LRE may be best viewed as a constellation of factors rather than a firmly defined concept or outline that enhances flexibility for IEP teams when determining the best educational settings for supporting a child's educational needs.¹⁵

For my purposes, the IDEIA requires that an individualized evaluation of the student and an in-depth consideration of the resulting data by an IEP team must occur before and principally inform the LRE determination.¹⁶ Put plainly, the educational needs of the child must be determined on the basis of empirical data generated through the use of educational evaluations. As such, the LRE concept and the educational decision-making process more broadly is predicated on a presumed value and use of educational evaluations to inform these decisions.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PROBLEM

The IDEIA has undoubtedly improved educational access and benefits for children with disabilities. OSEP reported that nearly 6.5 million children with disabilities received special education services in public schools during the 2018–19 school year, including nearly 421,000 SwID ages 6–21.¹⁷ Despite that improvement, statistics detailing where children with disabilities receive instruction during the school day suggest that SwID are less included than it may appear. During the 2018–19 SY, 48.7 percent of SwID were included in general education settings for less than 40 percent of the school day (highest disability category), with an additional 27.9 percent of SwID being included between 40–79 percent of the school day (highest disability category).¹⁸ Only 16.6 percent of SwID were included in general education settings for at least 80 percent of the school day (second lowest disability category).¹⁹ Notably, these statistics do not distinguish between the inclusion of SwID in academic and nonacademic

¹² IDEIA, § 1414 (d)(1)(A)(IV)(cc) and (V).

¹³ Jean Crockett, "Inclusion as Idea and Its Justification in Law," in *On Educational Inclusion*, ed. James Kauffman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020): 32–33.

¹⁴ Michael Wehmeyer, Karrie Shogren, and Jennifer Kurth, "State of Inclusion," *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 18, no. 1 (March 2021): 37.

¹⁵ Crockett, "Inclusion," 30.

¹⁶ Adrienne Woods, Yangyang Wang, and Paul L. Morgan, "Disproportionality and Inclusion," in *On Educational Inclusion*, ed. James Kauffman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020): 108.

¹⁷ Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), *43rd Annual Report to Congress*, xxiv.

¹⁸ OSEP, 57.

¹⁹ OSEP, 57.

settings. In a study reviewing 88 IEPs, Kurth et al. found that nearly 60 percent of the time during which students with low-incidence disabilities were included in general education settings occurred during nonacademic activities.²⁰ Together, these figures show that SwID have significantly less access to general education resources in comparison to other student populations.

Recent empirical studies have shown that the access differential described above can also negatively affect aspects of the learning and development of SwID. Ryndak has argued that separate special education settings are unable to replicate aspects of the general education setting that are invaluable to the academic and social development of SwID.²¹ Studies comparing the effects of inclusive and separate placements on SwID have shown that increased access to general education settings and services is positively associated with better learning and developmental outcomes.²² Meta-analyses of empirical studies conducted by Carlberg and Kavale, Wang and Baker, and Oh-Young and Filler have reported that students with disabilities in more inclusive settings significantly outperform those in separate settings on academic and social measures.²³ Hehir et al. summarize the empirical research on the inclusion of SwID in writing, “There is clear and consistent evidence that inclusive educational settings can confer substantial short- and long-term benefits for students with and without disabilities.”²⁴

The empirical problem demonstrated above is rather straightforward. SwID receive far less access to general education resources than other student populations. That access differential is not illegal or even unintended under the IDEIA, which does not guarantee equal access to specific educational resources,²⁵ but rather guarantees access to appropriate educational resources in accordance with the IEP.²⁶ The empirical findings described above show that increased access to general education settings facilitates better learning outcomes

²⁰ This term predominately refers to students with intellectual and multiple disabilities; Jennifer Kurth et al., “Considerations in Placement Decisions,” *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 44, no. 1 (2019): 14.

²¹ Diane Ryndak, “Foreword,” in *Academic Instruction for Students with Moderate and Severe Intellectual Disabilities*, June Downing (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010): ix-x.

²² See Martin Agran et al., “Why Aren’t Students with Severe Disabilities Being Placed in General Education Classrooms,” *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 45, no. 1 (2019): 5.

²³ Conrad Oh-Young and John Filler, “A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Placement on Academic and Social Skill Outcomes,” *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 47 (2015): 90.

²⁴ Thomas Hehir et al., *A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 2016), 2.

²⁵ Meghan Cosier et al., “Placement of Students with Extensive Support Needs,” *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* 12, no. 3 (January 2020): 249.

²⁶ IDEIA, § 1400 (d)(1)(a); IDEIA, § 1401 (9)(A-D).

for SwID, as well as improved access to vital developmental opportunities. These circumstances suggest that SwID do not receive access to the most appropriate educational resources to support their needs, but rather are restricted to accessing settings and services that confer diminished benefit in comparison to other student populations. Furthermore, it raises important questions regarding how access is distributed to this population.

John Dewey argued over a century ago in *Democracy and Education* that the way the student and their immaturity is conceptualized was an important point of departure for public education.²⁷ The immaturity of the student, for Dewey, was the fundamental condition of growth through education, and schools mistakenly interpreted this status comparatively with adulthood rather than intrinsically as a positive power of development.²⁸ This (mis)conceptualization of the student serves to establish the fully functional adult as “an ideal and static end” that informs both the meaning of educational progress and the goal of public education.²⁹ By contrast, Dewey argued that educational growth is not something done to the student in the sense of “pouring knowledge into a mental and moral hole which awaits filling,” but rather it is something the student actively and positively does.³⁰ Notably, the value of any conception of the student, for Dewey, lies in its effects on educational processes and outcomes experienced by real students.³¹ As such, he was concerned with the negative effects that this (mis)conception of the student carried for real students because the former functioned to deny important material features of the latter, such as students’ agency, capacities, interests, and goals. For my purposes, Dewey’s position suggests that educational practices can be understood as a response to a prior conception of the student, and effectively changing the former requires a prior revision to the latter. Using Dewey’s position as a point of departure, I will argue that there is an LCS that is implicit within the IDEIA that establishes two truths that govern LRE determinations that negatively affect SwID, thereby demonstrating the need to retheorize this conception of the student to expand access to general education resources for this population.

THE LCS AND SWID

The American legal tradition is rooted in the liberal philosophical and political tradition that traces back to Enlightenment values and principles that includes the priority of rationality and a belief in the unitary subject.³² For my purposes, the liberal tradition establishes three interrelated ontological claims

²⁷ John Dewey, “Democracy and Education,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey Volume 9*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press), 46.

²⁸ Dewey, “Democracy,” 46/56.

²⁹ Dewey, 48.

³⁰ Dewey, 48/57.

³¹ Scot Danforth, “John Dewey’s Contributions to an Educational Philosophy of Intellectual Disability,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 1 (2008): 58.

³² Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 13, 29, 31.

about the individual. First, the individual is prioritized in relation to various levels of social context such as the family, geographic or ideological communities, and the governmental state. This claim is clearly expressed in the classical liberal concepts of self-sovereignty, rational self-interest, and individual liberty,³³ as well as deontological forms of liberalism that posit the individual prior to its circumstances and chosen ends.³⁴ Second, rationality is established as the defining characteristic of the individual. This view can be traced back to the Greek tradition and is central to contemporary liberal theory that characterizes the individual as a rational agent defined by its “powers of reason, thought, and judgment.”³⁵ Third, the individual is accessible to the methods of empirical science because the rational processes that characterize it manifest in their self-directed actions in the world. That is, the rationality of the agent is taken to be externalizable and therefore accessible to empirical methods. These ontological claims produce a conceptualization of the individual as a socially atomistic and rational being whose essential and defining features are accessible to empirical methods of measurement.

The IDEIA participates in the liberal philosophical and political tradition and so expresses a conception of the student in alignment with the conceptual features described above. Specifically, an LCS is implicit in the IDEIA that establishes two truths that are discernible in the value and use of educational evaluations that govern LRE decisions. The first truth frames the student as an atomistic and rational being. This point is observable in how practitioners are required to evaluate students under the IDEIA. An eligibility team must develop an individualized battery of educational evaluations that assesses the student across academic and adaptive domains,³⁶ which measure individualized and rational forms of knowledge demonstration. The second truth holds that the student, defined by their atomism and rationality, is accessible to educational evaluations that purport to measure precisely those features of human learning and development. The IDEIA requires that all aspects of the special education process be principally informed by empirical evaluation data. As such, all institutional processes beginning with the eligibility determination through the LRE determination are predicated on the use of educational evaluations. Both truths are established through the implicit function of the LCS in the IDEIA, which serves to posit the student as the kind of being that corresponds to what educational evaluations purport to access and measure. As a result, the LCS grounds the value and use of educational evaluations and the foundation for making LRE determinations.

³³ G. H. Smith, *The System of Liberty* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-2.

³⁴ The works of Kant and Rawls are most commonly associated with this position.

³⁵ John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness,” in *Communitarianism and Individualism*, ed. Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 197.

³⁶ Yell, *Law and Special Education*, 201.

The LCS potentially carries broad implications for all students with disabilities, and I will briefly discuss three here. First, the LCS establishes which aspects of student learning and development matter for understanding educational progress and for determining if and to what extent it has occurred. Second, the LCS establishes which factors are most important for educational decision-making and specifically for distributing access to the most appropriate educational resources to support students' educational needs. Third, the LCS establishes the meaning of civil rights for students with disabilities (FAPE), as well as how practitioners ought to ensure them in educational practices. Notably, students may be affected differently by the LCS because their unique educational needs and disability characteristics may be evaluated differently against the priorities that it establishes that govern the special education process.

Here I will return to my discussion of SwID because I believe this population represents a quintessential example of the negative effects that the LCS carries for LRE determinations. Educational evaluations reward precisely the skills of independent functioning and instrumental rationality that SwID often struggle to demonstrate. That is, the priorities toward individualized, rational, and empirically measurable abilities that educational evaluations reflect overlap with the areas of weakness that often characterize the educational needs of this population. Furthermore, these priorities serve to minimize or omit important areas of student learning and development that are not easily accessible using educational evaluations, such as aspects of social, affective, and vocational areas. Both points can plausibly explain why SwID are more likely to be placed in separate special education classrooms in comparison to other student populations.³⁷ More significantly, they suggest that LRE determinations are predicated on educational evaluations that function to reduce the access that SwID have to general education resources. Put plainly, the IDEIA resists the inclusion of SwID because of the role of the LCS in making educational evaluations the foundation for making LRE decisions. This conclusion seems to render the prospect of educational inclusion for SwID almost oxymoronic, as well as indicate the need to retheorize how the student is conceptualized within the law.

DEWEY, RETHEORIZING THE LCS, AND POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

Dewey's work offers some resources for retheorizing the LCS in ways that could alter the value and use of educational evaluations for making LRE determinations for SwID. His general project of reconstruction included an attempt to retheorize the metaphysics of the self that he viewed as quintessentially expressed in the works of Descartes and Kant. Against these positions, Dewey argued that the self was misunderstood when taken as "something already made" or "something given" that exists in total beyond the

³⁷ Mary E. Morningstar, Jennifer A. Kurth, and Paul E. Johnson, "Examining National Trends in Educational Placements," *Remedial and Special Education* 38, no. 1 (2017): 8.

scope of experience.³⁸ He further argued, specifically against Kant, that the individual was also mistakenly viewed as a “ready-made self behind activities,”³⁹ thoughts, and actions in the world. By contrast, he viewed the individual as a being “in process” or “in the making” because they are continually being made and remade through transactions with one’s environment.⁴⁰ The individual, for Dewey, is embedded in and always bound up with specific historical and social contexts. He often pointed to familiar social arrangements, such as “laws, institutions” and local communities as environments that served as the principal “means of creating individuals.”⁴¹ Despite the significance of environmental factors in shaping the individual, Dewey also did not think that the individual was completely determined or constructed by them. Rather, he argued that individuals demonstrated a “plasticity” in their ability to learn from experience by forming habits of thought and action that served to shape and deflect future thoughts and actions.⁴² Dewey characterized this process of habit formation and transformation as growth because it is through them that the individual provisionally constitutes itself against the demands of their environment.⁴³ Garrison used the term “social self-creation” to capture Dewey’s view that the individual is rooted in a social context, yet capable of enacting a restricted sense of creation through engagement with it.⁴⁴ As such, Dewey viewed the individual as the combined and provisional product of both agency and structure.

Dewey’s conception of the individual can be used to retheorize the LCS to enable important changes to the process of making LRE determinations for SwID. The Deweyan student is not principally defined by abstract characteristics that educational evaluations have privileged access to. Furthermore, the Deweyan student is a communal being whose learning and development emphasize access to unstructured and opportunity-rich educational environments. Keeping these points in mind, reconceptualizing the student in this way could alter how LRE determinations are made in several ways that I will briefly discuss below. Note that the purpose of my discussion here is to sketch out some possibilities that I think become available to IEP teams as a result of retheorizing the student along Deweyan lines, rather than developing concrete alternatives for practitioners to implement.

³⁸ Dewey, “Democracy,” 98; John Dewey, “Reconstruction in Philosophy,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey Volume 12*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press), 191-92.

³⁹ John Dewey, “Human Nature and Conduct,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey Volume 14*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press), 97.

⁴⁰ Dewey, “Human,” 192-93, 151.

⁴¹ Dewey, “Reconstruction,” 192.

⁴² Dewey, “Democracy,” 58-59.

⁴³ Dewey, “Human,” 22-23; Dewey, “Democracy,” 58-59.

⁴⁴ Lance Mason, “The Self & Political Possibilities in Dewey and Foucault,” *Journal of Thought* 53, no. 1 (2019): 5.

First, retheorizing the student could displace the centrality of empirical data produced by educational evaluations for educational decision-making. If student learning and development are no longer reduced to a narrow set of *a priori* characteristics, then the priority ascribed to educational evaluations is diminished. Doing so would not eliminate the value and use of these instruments for educational decision-making, but rather would prevent LRE determinations from being made solely on the basis of the data they produce.⁴⁵ Furthermore, it would afford IEP teams greater flexibility to draw on a diverse range of evaluation tools and information sources to inform educational decision-making.

Second, retheorizing the student could alter the criteria on which LRE determinations are made by requiring a more serious consideration of forms of learning and development that are not as easily measured using educational evaluations. Such criteria might reasonably include forms of social, collaborative, affective, and vocational skills. Doing so would enable IEP teams to develop a potentially more robust and nuanced understanding of the student's educational needs prior to developing the IEP. Furthermore, this additional information could allow IEP teams to develop more creative ways to deploy special education resources to support the educational needs of students.

Third, retheorizing the student could alter how we view the benefits of inclusive educational placements for SwID. Educational practice is often viewed in the sense of a medical treatment in that educational needs are identified, interventions are implemented, and the effects are monitored and measured afterwards. On a Deweyan view, educational processes are misunderstood as linear exchanges initiated by the teacher and passively received by the student, but rather involve non-structured and student-driven exchanges with different features of changing environments. A Deweyan view foregrounds the value of unstructured and immersive learning using opportunity-rich environments in contrast to the priority placed on structured learning and targeted interventions established in the IDEIA. Furthermore, IEP teams would be encouraged to view a student's community of peers as an essential tool for supporting their learning and development, which could reduce their placement in separate special education classrooms.

Fourth, retheorizing the student could also facilitate a broader reconsideration of how the civil rights of students with disabilities are articulated within the IDEIA and ensured in educational practices. That is, the changes described above could require a rearticulation of FAPE to displace the priority of educational evaluations in the law to afford IEP teams greater legal flexibility regarding how they are able to provide FAPE for students with disabilities. Doing so would remove the legal barriers to implementing the changes described

⁴⁵ To clarify, my concern with educational evaluations is not with the validity of their findings, but rather with their function as the principal factor in determining LRE. I do not mean to reject the use of empirical methods for evaluating students, while also accepting such methods as they are used in empirical scholarship examining the effects of inclusion for SwID.

above in educational practices by no longer associating the provision of FAPE with specific methods of student evaluation and decision-making. Furthermore, it would enable educators to support the diverse and fluid learning and developmental needs of their students more flexibly and potentially more effectively.

Fifth, the overall effect of the changes described above could be the expansion of access to general education resources and their associated benefits for SwID. Retheorizing the student would serve to disrupt the conceptual and legal alignment between the student and aspects of the special education process that result in the determination of LRE. Doing so could fundamentally alter how IEP teams determine LRE by making it easier to legally and educationally justify the inclusion of SwID in general education classrooms. That is, deemphasizing how LRE is determined better positions IEP teams to use both general and special education resources to the benefit of students with disabilities. SwID could then be afforded increased access to the educational spaces and services that empirical studies have shown to facilitate the best learning and developmental outcomes for this population.⁴⁶ On a Deweyan view, retheorizing the student would be desirable because it would produce positive and tangible benefits for real students.

CONCLUSION

In summary, SwID receive significantly less access to general education resources in comparison to other student populations. Recent empirical scholarship has shown that this access differential negatively affects the learning and developmental outcomes of SwID. I have argued that this problem can be plausibly explained in terms of an implicit philosophical conception of the student that governs the determination of LRE for SwID by grounding the value and use of educational evaluations for informing educational decision-making. Specifically, an LCS establishes a conceptual and legal alignment between the student, empirical evaluation data, and the determination of LRE that functions to maintain educational practices that negatively affect SwID by restricting their access to general education resources that empirical studies have shown to facilitate better learning and developmental outcomes. Using resources from Dewey's work, I have argued that retheorizing how the student is conceptualized in the IDEIA carries the potential to expand opportunities for SwID to access general education resources and their associated benefits by altering aspects of the special education evaluation and decision-making process. Furthermore, doing so carries the potential to expand the inclusion of all students with disabilities by changing the implicit standards that govern student evaluation, educational decision-making, and, more broadly, the provision of FAPE.

⁴⁶ Notably, I am not arguing in support of the full inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. That is, I do not think that a single arrangement of educational settings and services can adequately meet the needs of all students.

ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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At present, an authoritarian insurgency against the institutions of liberal democracy operates along both political-economic and phenomenological axes. By corrupting language and stimulating vigilance, this insurgency endeavors to diminish the perceptual and communicative capacities that allow us to articulate a shared reality and exercise agency within it. Considering education as a political and economic enterprise concerned with attention-formation, public schools present a site battle in which to defend and promote the conditions and practices of a free and democratic society.

AUTHORITARIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

The point is that the impact of factual reality, like all other human experiences, needs speech if it is to survive the moment of experience, needs talk and communication with others to remain sure of itself. Total domination succeeds to the extent that it succeeds in interrupting all channels of communication, those from person to person inside the four walls of privacy no less than the public ones which are safeguarded in democracies by freedom of speech and opinion.

-Hannah Arendt¹

Attention is about personal liberation—liberating ourselves from people who are controlling our minds without our consent.

-Ben Stewart²

Truth, argued Hannah Arendt, is the greatest enemy of authoritarianism; and language, she added, is an indispensable tool for drawing our attention to it.³ Resonant with the 1930's, today's authoritarian leaders aim to conquer reality by degrading language and corrupting attention. Drawing an historical example, the Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen recounts how the former Soviet leadership would describe its 'elections'—in which participation was mandatory and ballots were pre-marked—as the 'free expression of citizen will,' when in fact these rituals were, Gessen reminds us, "not at all free, did not constitute

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 8th Edition (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1963), 495.

² Ben Stewart, quoted in Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention and How to Think Deeply Again* (New York, NY: Crown, 2022), 276.

³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

expression, and had no relationship to citizenship or will.”⁴ Over the course of generations, such malign use of words stripped the Russian language of meaning, rendering people unable to describe and communicate what they thought and experienced: “When something cannot be described,” writes Gessen, “it does not become a fact of shared reality.”⁵ Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin depicts his war against Ukraine as a “peacekeeping operation” and imprisons those who publicly call the war a war. Russian parents avoid this doublespeak in their homes for fear that their children will repeat it at school, which could result in the parents never seeing their children again. Beyond this, Putin has liquidated independent media, outlawed public gatherings, shuttered public institutions, and banished entire schools of thought—including Feminism and Psychoanalysis—from Russian universities, in essence abolishing the intellectual and communicative tools that people use to make sense of and exercise agency in their lives.⁶ Here, in the United States, authoritarians similarly assault the tools of language and thought that we utilize to understand and shape our world.

In the American context, Donald Trump, the alpha male of the Republican Party and avatar of the authoritarian insurgency, has assiduously degraded the English language. During the past half decade, terms such as ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ have become national shibboleths for whether one inhabits factual reality or the confabulated fever dreams of the authoritarian leader. Former President Trump has, for instance, habitually used the term “witch hunt” to disparage investigations into his many corrupt and criminal acts. Historically, “witch hunt” refers to efforts by the powerful to scapegoat the powerless. By inverting the term’s meaning, Trump, who as President was arguably the most powerful person in the world, turns reality on its head and vicariously fuels his subjects’ sentiments of victimhood.⁷ Following suit, right-wing culture warriors have taken to labeling schoolteachers as ‘groomers,’ a term which victims of abuse have historically utilized to describe the social and psychological process through which sexual predators carry out heinous crimes. Such malign and misleading use of words demeans experiences of actual victims and weakens the tools that people use to articulate shared moral and ethical perspectives. Timothy Snyder, a scholar of fascism who teaches History at Yale, adds that it is not possible to meaningfully debate authoritarians because they do not act in good faith, and lie not merely to deceive, but to demonstrate that they are more powerful than factual reality.⁸ The authoritarian leader is the bully, Gessen illustrates, who has stolen your bike, is sitting on it, looking you straight in the face and telling you that he did not steal it. With lies such as these,

⁴ Masha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2020), 86.

⁵ Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy*, 86.

⁶ Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2017), chap. 2.

⁷ Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy*, 91.

⁸ Timothy Snyder, “We Should Say It. Russia Is Fascist,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html>.

authoritarians compel us, under a heightened state of vigilance that they induce, to choose which reality we want to live in: factual reality or the reality of their lies, the latter of which requires that we ignore our own thoughts and experiences.⁹

Concurrently, American politicians are intensifying legislative efforts to restrict teachers' use of language and ideas in schools. Throughout the country, school districts have enacted bans on thousands of books related to race, gender, sexuality, and controversial aspects of American History.¹⁰ In numerous Republican-dominated states, memory laws encourage parents to snitch on their children's teachers for offenses that may include teaching about slavery or displaying pictures of their same-sex spouse.¹¹ In one recent example, North Shore Elementary School in Tampa, Florida, responded to a parent complaint by removing *Ruby Bridges*, Disney's 1998 film about the six-year-old Black girl who faced racist attacks while integrating a New Orleans elementary school in 1960, from its Black History Month curriculum.¹² Meanwhile, Ohio's Orwellian Higher Education Enhancement Act, or Senate Bill 83, proposes to ban discussion of "controversial beliefs or policies," including climate change, immigration, abortion, and other topics from publicly-funded college classrooms. SB 83 additionally requires institutions of higher education to publish undergraduate course syllabi, searchable by key words and phrases, along with faculty bios and descriptions of all course texts, lectures, and discussions. The law also compels colleges and universities to discipline and publish the names of faculty who violate its codes.¹³ Florida's HB 1069 appears to go even farther toward criminalizing schools of thought such as Critical Theory, Gender, and Race studies in both K-12 and post-secondary schools.¹⁴ The law also criminalizes use or recognition of gender pronouns that do not align with a person's biologically defined sex.¹⁵ In effect, these laws induce fear and

⁹ Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy*, 99-111.

¹⁰ Karis Rogerson, "The State of Book Bans in the U.S. in 2023," *PEN America*, February 15, 2023, <https://litreactor.com/columns/more-the-state-of-book-bans-in-the-us-in-2023>.

¹¹ House Bill 322 – Ohio 134th General Assembly (June 10, 2021), <https://ohiohouse.gov/legislation/134/hb322>. Also, House Bill 327 – Ohio 134th General Assembly (May 21, 2021), <https://ohiohouse.gov/legislation/134/hb327>. Also, House Bill 1557 – Florida State Legislature 2022 (July 1, 2022), <https://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Bills/billsdetail.aspx?BillId=76545>.

¹² Edward Helmore, "Florida School Pulls Anti-Racism Film Ruby Bridges After Parent Complaint," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/28/ruby-bridges-florida-school-anti-racism-film-parent-complaint>.

¹³ Senate Bill 83 – Ohio 135th General Assembly (March 14, 2023), <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/135/sb83>.

¹⁴ House Bill 1069 – Florida State Legislature (July 1, 2023), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2023/1069>.

¹⁵ Prem Thakker, "Florida Republicans Pass New Bills Guaranteed to Destroy Academic Freedom," *The New Republic*, May 3, 2023,

suspicion, render minority and non-conforming persons ‘unspeakable,’ and deprive students of tools with which to understand themselves and the world.

In addition to impairing their abilities to communicate the truth, authoritarian leaders seek to diminish their subjects’ capacities to perceive reality by stimulating vigilance. An atavistic form of animal attention, vigilance is a non-reflective, reactionary mode of consciousness commonly triggered by fear and anger.¹⁶ Distinct from authoritarian propaganda of the previous century, which steadily reinforced a particular narrative, twenty-first century authoritarian propaganda seeks to befuddle the public with multiple, incoherent narratives and shape-shifting pictures of reality.¹⁷ The documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis illustrates this dynamic in his 2016 picture for the British Broadcasting Corporation, *Hypernormalization*. Here, Curtis argues that Vladislav Surkov, a young man from the Russian theatre industry who became Putin’s propaganda minister, attempted to manipulate the images and narratives of the mass media in order to undermine people’s perceptions of reality to such an extent that no one could ever be sure of what was actually happening. By funding opposing political parties and instigating clashing fascist and anti-fascist protests, Surkov found that he could not only distract people from the oligarchic corruption eating away at Russian society, but also instill such uncertainty and anxiety in the population as to obliterate politics altogether. Borrowing this strategy, which he has referred to as “flooding the zone with shit,” Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist, has sought to undermine the press’s authority as gatekeeper of truth in order to generate mass epistemic hysteria.¹⁸ Saturated with information and mis-information, Bannon assumed that people would become, as Sabrina Tavernise and Aidan Gardiner put it, “numb and disoriented, struggling to discern what is real in a sea of slant, fake and fact.”¹⁹

In parallel, the authoritarian insurgency avails itself of the business model of *surveillance capitalism*, which malignantly incentivizes the corruption of attention. Surveillance capitalist giants such as Alphabet and Meta, parent companies of Google and Facebook, respectively, achieve their profits primarily by stealing and selling users’ digitalized behavioral data, which we generate through our clicks, swipes, likes, shares, and other multitudinous, digitally interfacing activities, which may include shopping, exercising, driving, eating,

<https://newrepublic.com/post/172416/florida-republicans-pass-bills-destroy-academic-freedom>.

¹⁶ Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again* (New York, NY: Crown, 2022), 172.

¹⁷ Sean Illing, “Flood the Zone With Shit,” *Vox*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation>.

¹⁸ Adam Curtis, *Hypernormalization*, British Broadcasting Corporation (2016), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04b183c>.

¹⁹ Sabrina Tavernise and Aidan Gardiner, “No One Believes Anything: Voters Worn Out by a Fog of Political News,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/us/polls-media-fake-news.html>.

sleeping, or watching television.²⁰ By feeding masses of behavioral, psychological, and demographic data through predictive algorithms, surveillance capitalists identify users' emotional triggers—fear and anger being the most powerful kinds—in order to target behavioral reinforcements calculated to lead to addictive patterns of engagement. Illustratively, the words 'hates,' 'obliterates,' 'slams,' and 'destroys' recently ranked as the four most common words in YouTube's top video titles.²¹ Conditioning us to attend to other people's anger, surveillance capitalist enterprises engender states of vigilance that diminish our capacities to perceive, reason, and empathize.

In 1976, the Ivy League psychologist Juilan Jaynes published a theory of what he called *the bicameral mind*. Until roughly the end of the Mediterranean Bronze Age, Jaynes submitted, the human mind consisted of one part that spoke and acted, and another part that listened and obeyed. The heroes of Greek epic poetry, including those chronicled by Homer, argued Jaynes, appear to have believed the voices in their heads to be the voices of the gods. This bicameral mentality would, in effect, have been a form of non-introspective and non-metaphorical consciousness. The soldiers who fought the Trojan War, Jaynes bids us to imagine, would have marched and died as unthinkingly as pawns on a chess board.²² Whether Jaynes intended *the bicameral mind* to be interpreted literally or allegorically, the theory resonates with contemporary warnings about ways that power operates in our digital society. Aza Raskin, the software engineer responsible for inventing the infinite scroll, and the son of Jeff Raskin, who designed and named the first Macintosh Computer, alleges that highly influential tech designers envision themselves in the role of the old Bronze Age gods. Major tech companies, as Raskin illustrates, assemble 'voodoo dolls' of users based upon the demographic and behavioral information that they gather: age, gender, race, marital status, health, intelligence, shopping habits, sexual interests, anxieties, political affinities, emotional triggers, etc. By testing how a user will react to all manner of stimuli, engineers resolve how to prod the doll in order to get the living person to click a link, share a story, purchase a product, donate money, holler about 'evil CRT' at a local school board meeting, menace a drag queen story hour at a public library, or storm the U.S. Capitol Building. Malevolent actors, fears Raskin, are infiltrating the human subconscious and becoming the voice inside people's heads that grants them permission to surrender to their darkest impulses. Resisting their spell involves settling our atavistic neurocircuitry and opening the apertures of awareness.

ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN EDUCATION

²⁰ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2019).

²¹ Hari, *Stolen Focus*, 131.

²² Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

The formation of the faculty of attention is the true goal and unique interest of all studies.

-Simone Weil ²³

Mindfulness can help us get beyond the habits and thought patterns we take for granted and experience the world differently. It can help us develop the ability to reflect, contemplate, exercise wise discernment, and look behind outer appearances to see interconnections and deeper truths.

-Thich Nhat Hanh & Katherine Weare²⁴

According to ancient tradition, human consciousness functions as a two-way radio, with sending and receiving functions. During the Middle Ages, church scholars referred to analytic and discursive modes of attention as the *ratio*, and wrote of receptive, intuitive, and aesthetic modes of attention as the *intellectus*.²⁵ Whereas the former entails muscular and productive effort, the latter is more akin to passive, effortless awareness. Full humanity, Thomas Aquinas maintained, requires balanced cultivation of both *ratio* and *intellectus*.²⁶ Drawing from this model, Simone Weil, the early-twentieth century mystic philosopher, depicted mature attention as a form of libidinal desire, free from ego, which allows us to be deeply receptive to the thoughts and feelings of others. Deep attention, she argued, is foundational to moral and ethical life. Committed to respecting the will and consent of the other, it serves as a foundation for true love and friendship, as well as an antidote to the will to power.²⁷ Considered through a phenomenological framework, democracy entails a commitment to respect the will and consent of the other. Hence, democratic education requires systematic cultivation of attention. As an enterprise of attention formation, schools can help students practice habits of mind with which to navigate the vigilance-inducing conditions of twenty-first century American society. Through a holistic curriculum that exercises the neural pathways of awareness, reason, and compassion, students can enhance their abilities to perceive, understand, and ultimately change their circumstances.

For half a century, however, neoliberal policies have poured acid on mental health and the habits of deep attention. Atomized, overworked, indebted, sleep-deprived, and ubiquitously confronted with a digital business model of attention-capture, Americans report suffering unprecedented levels of stress-

²³ Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies in View of the Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2009), 57-65.

²⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh & Katherine Weare, *Happy Teachers Change the World* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2017), 225.

²⁵ Joseph Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009), 28-29, 49.

²⁶ Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, 50.

²⁷ Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies."

related attention problems.²⁸ In truth, schools bear a fraught historical and contemporary relation to the aims of democracy and healthy mindedness. Formed during the Industrial Revolution, the modern school has served a principal division of labor in the reproduction of political-economic exploitation. Endowed with vestiges of Calvinist ideology, the institution has frequently served to break wills and frustrate healthy desires. During the past half century, neoliberal education policies have undermined conditions for healthy mindedness by constraining free play and inquiry, and by cutting funds that schools require to provide rich learning environments and to employ highly trained teachers, counselors, and specialists in sufficient numbers to meet student needs. These austerity policies have condemned students to chaotic classrooms in which they vigilantly scan their environments for threats of shouting teachers, ritualized performances of academic inadequacy, or the taunts, fists, and behavioral outbursts of classmates crying out in futility for attention from a caring adult. More recently, in response to the extension of fuller rights of citizenship to a broader diversity of Americans, authoritarians have sought to censor teaching about the nation's radical history of struggles for freedom and instead endeavored to bind their subjects in a negative solidarity of shared grievance against criminalized and dehumanized 'others.' These intensifying attacks against public education suggest that the institution remains capable of threatening authoritarian ambitions.

In the present context, teachers combat authoritarianism by building healthy habits of attention, individually through mindfulness, and collectively by encouraging the conditions for healthy mindedness in their schools and classrooms. Emphatically, mindfulness is not a cure for the attentional-carcinogenic conditions of poverty, malnutrition, pollution, and violence. No reasonable person would claim that we can solve deep structural and institutional problems simply by meditating. However, to the extent that consciousness mediates our lives, mindfulness can help us to become more aware, understanding, and empathetic. For teachers, this entails being calm, present, and attentive to their students' thoughts and feelings. Just like parents in the home or managers in the workplace, teachers are the emotional weather in the classroom. If teachers are preoccupied and anxious, the class will be stressful for students. However, if teachers embody compassion and joy, the class can become a happy and loving place.

In her study of teaching expertise in three cultures, the educational anthropologist Akiko Hayashi interviews scores of veteran educators who attest that learning to teach is, in substantial part, a matter of learning how to pay attention. Novice teachers, these veterans assert, "don't [yet] know how to pay attention."²⁹ Similar to beginners in other fields of endeavor, new teachers are

²⁸ Hari, *Stolen Focus*, 172.

²⁹ Akiko Hayashi, *Teaching Expertise in Three Countries: Japan, China, and the United States* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), 159.

‘too much in their own heads:’ preoccupied by their own thoughts, anxious about how others perceive them, narrowly focused on lesson plans, and unable to “truly see, hear, and therefore learn from the children in front of them.”³⁰ As teachers become more practiced, however, they gain confidence, composure, and patience that allow them to be more attentive to their students’ thoughts and feelings. With greater awareness, experienced teachers describe themselves as more capable of quickly and effectively intervening when needed, but also better able to stand back and allow students time and space for productive struggle or conflict. As a result, Hayashi’s respondents tell her, their classrooms become more trusting and self-disciplined.³¹

Many early childhood educators cultivate mindful and attention-healthy classrooms through an approach known as *Conscious Discipline*, designed by Becky Bailey, an expert in developmental psychology. By helping children recognize, name, and calm their powerful emotions, Bailey claims that the practice lays groundwork for compassion, self-discipline, and intrinsic motivation.³² Advocates maintain that conscious discipline is an embodied pedagogy that teachers implicitly convey to students. A teacher’s calmness, composure, and presence communicate to students that they can express themselves without fear.

Toward the end of incorporating mindfulness into the lives of teachers, organizations such as Plum Village, a Buddhist retreat in southern France, founded by the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, lead teachers in the practice of techniques such as mindful breathing. By focusing attention on their breath, practitioners learn to find joy and composure in this simple and readily available act. Extending the same principle to mundane activities of work and home, including cooking, eating, cleaning, and conducting a classroom, practitioners build habits for sustaining joyful and loving awareness. Plum Village graduates claim that these mindfulness practices allow them to exercise greater conscious control over their experiences of, and responses to, powerful emotional states. They also describe finding themselves better able to cultivate the kinds of classroom environments that aid students in discovering their own deep reservoirs of attention.³³

Anti-authoritarian education does not simply guard students’ minds from vigilance-inducing stimuli; it actively fills them with activities that evoke deep attention. Human beings feel most alive when engaged in meaningful activities that challenge us to the edge of our abilities. Artists, athletes, and scientists engaged in their crafts often describe losing their sense of time and self, and merging their awareness with the task at hand. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, once head of the department of Psychology at the University

³⁰ Hayashi, *Teaching Expertise in Three Countries*, 41.

³¹ Hayashi, 58-63.

³² Becky Bailey, *Conscious Discipline: Building Resilient Classrooms* (Oviedo, FL: Loving Guidance, INC., 2015).

³³ Hanh & Wear, *Happy Teachers Change the World*, xxvi-xlv.

of Chicago, describes this as a *flow state* and claims that it is one of the deepest forms of attention that humans practice.³⁴ Flow states, he discovered, require singular focus; they are fragile and easily interrupted. For children, free play is a primary state of flow that lays deep neurosynaptic tracks of attention. However, according to research by William Stixrud, a clinical neuropsychologist, and Ned Johnson, an expert on student performance and anxiety management, today's children enjoy far less free play than did preceding generations.³⁵ In response to growing inequality and precariousness, Stixrud and Johnson argue, parents have increasingly organized and directed their children's time and activities toward instrumental ends—taking up sports, arts, and clubs as work rather than leisure.³⁶ At the same time, critics bemoan the ways in which the past four decades of standards-and-accountability reforms have stripped free inquiry from school curricula and overwhelmed teachers with duties of bureaucratic conformity—including data collection, test preparation, and rigidly prescribed lesson plans—that steal their attention from students.³⁷ Teachers, laments Doris Santoro, professor of education at Bowdoin College, “are being asked to do things in the name of [accountability] that they believe are mis-educational and harmful to students and the profession.”³⁸

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, perennially among the most frequently banned books in the world, Paulo Freire reproached the modern school for distracting students from their lived experiences of oppression and diverting their attention away from the feelings and intuitions that can ultimately lead to political consciousness and agency.³⁹ Freire, like Simone Weil before him, encouraged students to attend to their emotions as guides to identifying the most relevant problems facing them. Motivated by intrinsic desire, both believed, education could lead students toward conscientization, a growing awareness of reality and appreciation for possibilities to change it. Throughout the past decade, the teaching profession has demonstrated itself to be among the most well-organized forces for democracy in American society. In the years prior to the covid-19 pandemic, teachers built coalitions with parents, students, and citizens to win significant concessions from political leaders that enhanced teaching and

³⁴ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York, NY: Harper, 2008).

³⁵ William Stixrud & Ned Johnson, *The Case for the Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives* (Penguin Books, 2019).

³⁶ KJ Dell’Antonia, “How High School Ruined Leisure,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/18/opinion/sunday/college-admissions-extracurriculars.html>.

³⁷ Katherine Marsh, “Why Kids Aren’t Falling in Love with Reading,” *The Atlantic*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2023/03/children-reading-books-english-middle-grade/673457/>.

³⁸ Quoted in Thomas Edsall, “There’s a Reason There Aren’t Enough Teachers in America,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/14/opinion/teacher-shortage-education.html>.

³⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).

learning conditions.⁴⁰ By securing funding for healthcare, counseling, healthier food, smaller class sizes, developmentally appropriate curricula, better pay, and greater professional autonomy, this movement promoted conditions for healthy mindedness in schools across the nation. Although the pandemic halted much of this educational labor activism, teachers have begun re-organizing and stepping up to defend their students and colleagues whom the authoritarian insurgency has targeted for criminalization and dehumanization.⁴¹

Almost twenty years ago, David Foster Wallace, in his Kenyon College Commencement address, stated that the true purpose of education, “Capital-T True,” as he emphasized, is the ability to exercise some control over how and what we think. It is all too easy today to swim merrily along in the pool of fear and anger and worship of self. If we do not systematically cultivate the arts of perception and language, we will, to quote Wallace, “get totally hosed.”⁴² Like Aldous Huxley, Wallace believed that human beings can learn to exercise a meaningful degree of conscious control over how they experience and live in the world.⁴³ Today, an authoritarian insurgency aims to thwart this educational aim by corrupting language, criminalizing tools of thought, and encouraging violence from an increasingly fearful, angry, and vigilant population. Nonetheless, there are resources at our disposal with which to effectively respond. Although traditional tools for healthy mindedness may not eliminate the primary sources of vigilance—poverty, hunger, pollution, precarity, etc.—they can strengthen our phenomenological defenses and help us to better perceive and understand our circumstances. As a public enterprise concerned with attention formation, and while recognizing their fraught history, schools offer a site at which to defend and promote the conditions and practices of a free and democratic society. Throughout the past decade, few organizations have flexed as much democratic muscle as our professional teachers. Along with them, students, parents, and engaged citizens have won funding to pay teachers, materially improve schools, and offer students the variety of social, psychological, and emotional resources that they need. Each of these gains contributes to a healthier environment in which to develop the faculties of perception, reason, and compassion.

⁴⁰ Jack Crosbie, “As the Strike Approached in Chicago, Teachers Taught Labor,” *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/10/chicago-teachers-explained-strike-students/600667/>.

⁴¹ Tim Walker, “Educators Fight Back Against Gag Orders, Book Bans and Intimidation,” *neaToday*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/educators-fight-back-against-gag-orders-book-bans-and-intimidation>.

⁴² David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water,” Kenyon College Commencement Address, May 21, 2005, <http://bulletin-archive.kenyon.edu/x4280.html>.

⁴³ Aldous Huxley, *Island* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2009), chap. 7.

ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF VIGILANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL RE-ARTICULATION OF THE TEACHER

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Recent legislation restricting the topics teachers may discuss with students raises the issue of what role the teacher should play in society. We argue that this legislative scrutiny of teachers is symptomatic of an aversion to defining what a teacher *is*. We argue that, though a reluctance to provide an explicit definition of “teacher” may be warranted for reasons of democracy, academic freedom, and diversity, it also leaves open the possibility of political appropriations of the teacher, some of which may be the antithesis of democracy, academic freedom, and diversity. The role of the teacher thus remains subject to perpetual interrogation and change. A well-theorized and stable definition of the teacher, then, would preclude appropriations of the teacher for political purposes such as cultural assimilation,¹ religious indoctrination,² or economic gain.³ Such a definition would need to be sufficiently broad to be applicable to all teachers in all places, while remaining narrow enough to ward off undemocratic impositions. In other words, the definition must be ontological, structural. We employ the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida to evaluate the meaning of “teacher.” We first give an example of a legally binding document that provides *only* negative definitions of the teacher. We then provide an overview of Derrida’s theory of iterability and Heidegger’s philosophy of language, while utilizing and critiquing an alternative conception of the Derridean teacher offered by Charles Bingham. We argue that the teacher, properly construed, ought to engage in an explicit, intersubjective inquiry into the ontological foundations of existence.

CODES OF ETHICS

The Georgia Code of Ethics for Educators (GCEE) will serve as an example of a legally binding document that refrains from making any positive determinations of “teacher.” The purpose of the code is to define “the professional behavior of educators in Georgia” and serve “as a guide to ethical conduct.”⁴ Though the GCEE *does* provide a list of definitions which apply to

¹ W.H. Llewellyn, *Comanche boys at the Albuquerque Indian School*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1882, The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, P08585, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/code-talkers/collection-gallery/>.

² *The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts*, Harvard University Press, 1929.

³ Deron Boyles, ed. *The Corporate Assault on Youth: Commercialism, Exploitation, and the End of Innocence* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁴ “The Code of Conduct for Educators,” Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 1, <https://www.gapsc.com/rules/current/ethics/505-6-.01.pdf>.

the teacher, all of them define what teaching is only negatively. The explanation of the term “educator,” for example, is circular and empty: “‘Educator’ is a teacher, school or school system administrator, or other education personnel who holds a certificate issued by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission...”⁵ An educator, in other words, “as defined by the Code,” is “a person holding a certificate from the authors of the Code.” The other terms defined by the GCEE behave less like definitions and more like warnings:

- (a) “Breach of contract occurs when an educator fails to honor a signed contract for employment with a school/school system by resigning in a manner that does not meet the guidelines established by the GaPSC.”⁶

Similarly, “Child endangerment occurs when an educator disregards a substantial and/or unjustifiable risk of bodily harm to the student.”⁷ The terms “inappropriate” and “physical abuse” are defined in an analogously negative manner.

Though the GCEE was first adopted in 1994,⁸ other professional codes of ethics preempted it by more than a century. While there may not have been a legally binding Code of Ethics, educational licensure was required as early as the nineteenth century, when being a teacher meant adhering to strict lifestyle expectations. Practical concerns over the availability of teachers in rural schoolhouses led to the institution of a rule against women getting married while teaching.⁹ Marriage, the logic goes, is “normally followed by pregnancy,” and “the teacher would most likely be unable to finish the term if she were to become pregnant.”¹⁰ Other rules targeted the teacher’s “honor,” which meant that female teachers caught smoking or courting men were considered bad role models for children.¹¹ Male teachers, however, were allowed to “go out” one or two nights a week. Violations of these rules led to immediate termination.¹² The American Medical Association’s (AMA) 1847 code, on the other hand, was described as “deontological.”¹³ “Medical men,” it states, are duty-bound to risk their safety for the community. In return, the community is to afford respect and deference

⁵ “The Code of Conduct for Educators,” Georgia Professional Standards Commission.

⁶ “The Code of Conduct for Educators,” Georgia Professional Standards Commission.

⁷ “The Code of Conduct for Educators,” Georgia Professional Standards Commission.

⁸ Hope La’Monica Fordham, “An Examination of Standard Violations from 2002 to 2004 of the Georgia Code of Ethics,” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2005), 10, https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/fordham_hope_1_200508_edd.pdf.

⁹ Valerie Strauss, “Rules for Teachers in 1872,” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/rules-for-teachers-in-1872-no-marriage-for-women-or-barber-shops-for-men/2011/06/01/AGTSSpGH_blog.html.

¹⁰ Strauss, “Rules.”

¹¹ Strauss, “Rules.”

¹² Strauss, “Rules.”

¹³ “Code of Medical Ethics,” American Medical Association, 1847, https://www.ama-assn.org/sites/ama-assn.org/files/corp/media-browser/public/ethics/1847code_0.pdf.

to their doctors.¹⁴ The AMA's code of ethics is based on a reciprocal interplay of rights and duties, both of which are necessary for the code to function properly.

It is important to note that the AMA's code pertains to what practitioners should *do*: it dictates and prescribes. In this way, the AMA inscribes a clear pattern of behavior for those who become doctors. The early ethical expectations of teachers, however, proscribed specific actions as a preventative measure. In the eighteenth century, for example, the "minimum standards" for educating children were created out of a concern that children might grow up to be a "part of a nonworking pauper class."¹⁵ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, schools used curricular tools such as McGuffey Readers to instill patriotic values in their students.¹⁶ The earliest U.S. education standards, in other words, were justified on the basis of a concern that some state of affairs *not* come to fruition, the implication being that the job of a teacher was preventative risk-management.

The standards-based reform that took hold in the 1980's reinforced the sense of "risk management" associated with earlier paradigms.¹⁷ The *Nation at Risk* report begins with the phrase "our nation is at risk," clarifying that the danger stems from a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people."¹⁸ This reform movement reinscribed the notion of mediating some threat against students *qua* the future of the nation. The threat also manifests as an aversion to defining what "teacher" means, or what "teachers" do. This aversion is apparent even in the early stages of standards-based reform, as in, for example, the attempt to "improve instruction" by providing performance incentives, rather than delineating what instruction should look like.¹⁹ Whereas the AMA's code of conduct describes the actions that doctors *should perform*, codes of conduct in education set standards while avoiding the codification of what teachers *are*.²⁰

Because the GCEE is more analogous to an instruction manual on how to avoid risk, rather than a positive delineation of teacherly comportment, the

¹⁴ American Medical Association, "Code of Medical Ethics."

¹⁵ Michael S. Katz, "A History of Compulsory Education Laws," *Phi Delta Kappa* (1976): 12, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED119389.pdf>.

¹⁶ Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Schooling America: How the Public Schools Meet the Nation's Changing Needs* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Lorrie Shepard, Jane Hannaway, and Eva Baker, "Standards, Assessments, and Accountability," *National Academy of Education*, 2009, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED531138.pdf>.

¹⁸ "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," The National Commission on Excellence in Education, April 1983, https://edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/A_Nation_At_Risk_1983.pdf.

¹⁹ Shepard, Hannaway, & Baker, "Standards," 2.

²⁰ The more recent focus on "best practices" and "what works" might be an exception to this, although these practices are, as of yet, not required by any binding code. Furthermore, our purpose in highlighting the AMA's code of ethics is not to endorse a "positive" version of a code, but merely to point out that positive versions do exist.

“teacher” *simpliciter* is left undefined. This amorphous teacher interacts with the world in the exact negative image of the standards laid out in the Code. These worldly interactions are, apparently, fraught, requiring strict regulations to prevent risk from actualizing. This preventative orientation casts teachers as potentially harmful actors, and the historical absence of ethical parameters of the teacher allows the profession to be appropriated for myriad ulterior purposes.

ERASURE

The failure to provide any positive determinations of “teacher,” however, may be unavoidable. Charles Bingham argues that “the teacher is called upon to erase him or herself in order to become a mouthpiece for whatever content is under consideration,” such that “texts, concepts, ideas...speak for themselves.”²¹ Conceptualizing teachers as those who give knowledge to others implies an economy in which information is transmitted from the teacher to the student. This “information” must be construed as immediately clear. People, however, are not immediately clear. Instead, the information taught is always “deferred” and “differed,” according to Derrida’s concept of *différance*. Bingham explains that teachers defer content by “representing content in a reified way.”²² Similarly, teachers differ content because, as Bingham writes, “what one says has a context. One speaks from a certain orientation.”²³

It would therefore appear that the existence of teachers would be precluded. If teachers are to be translucent vehicles through which ideal entities *qua* content pass, how can those who acknowledge the problematics of this economy still claim the right to be called a “teacher”? Bingham’s solution is a redoubling of teacherly vigilance. He argues that teachers should account for the impossibility of erasing themselves, while acknowledging the non-existence of immediate information that can simply be transmitted. Bingham suggests that teachers need a “heightened awareness” against terminological complacency. We argue that, though Bingham’s identification of the problematic of teaching is cogent, his appeal to vigilance as an antidote to *différance* is precluded by *différance* itself.

DERRIDA THE EDUCATOR

Derrida argued in *Of Grammatology* that the history of “Western metaphysics, as the limitation of the sense of being within the field of presence,”²⁴ inevitably led to the claim that speech, purportedly the purest form of intuitable self-presence, is, for that reason, the natural, metaphysical *home* of truth. Derrida explains that, because the “voice is *heard*...closest to the self,”²⁵ it has been privileged as the medium through which truth *must* be conveyed.

²¹ Charles Bingham, “Derrida on Teaching: The Economy of Erasure,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 27 (2008): 15-31, 18.

²² Bingham, “Derrida on Teaching,” 20.

²³ Bingham, “20.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 24.

²⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 21.

Writing was therefore historically deemed a derivative phenomenon, removed from truth and therefore unimportant for philosophical analysis. This overvaluation of speech, however, depended on a metaphysics that is not evidenced in phenomenological experience.²⁶ The notion that writing is a derivative corruption of speech implies that language is essentially pure;²⁷ that spoken concepts are *first* intuitively available to a seamlessly perceiving consciousness, only afterw(o)rds to be degraded into writing. Such immediate sonorous intuition is problematic due to the implication of a dualism that sets the soul against the body and inside against outside. Rather than attempt to provide a final critique or resolution to these perennial philosophical problems, however, Derrida observes that overlooked is the *condition of their possibility*.

For Derrida, what makes the problems associated with the matter-form binary thinkable at all is that concepts are precisely *not immediately intuitable*, and that signs are instituted, rather than natural. As Saussure pointed out, signifiers are inherently “unmotivated,” arbitrarily assigned to signifieds without any inherent connection between them.²⁸ The particular sound “tree” is an arbitrary convention, given meaning only in relation to other signifiers. That signs are arbitrary, however, negates any claims of a “natural subordination” between *categories* of signifiers.²⁹ Furthermore, Derrida explains, “if ‘writing’ signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign...writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs.”³⁰ The essential characteristics of writing would therefore be generalizable to language *in toto*.

Writing must, for example, “remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee...even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written.”³¹ Said differently, writing always already implies the possibility of the absence of both the author and the reader. This absence also means that “one can always lift a written syntagma from the interlocking chain in which it is caught or given without making it lose every possibility of functioning.”³² One can employ a sentence written by anyone for any purpose whatsoever, regardless of the context in which it was written or intended. *Every* signifier, because it is only itself by *not* being its signified, is already constituted by a distance from its referent which renders the sign always already “internally” and “externally” differentiated. Furthermore, the signified need not be “present” to the signifier in order for the signifier to function; when the sign “tree” is typed, there need not be any trees present to the typist’s vision, yet the sign is still *iterable*. Writing is, then, instead

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *A Derrida Reader*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 80-112.

²⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 43.

²⁸ Derrida, 35.

²⁹ Derrida, 48.

³⁰ Derrida, 48.

³¹ Derrida, *Signature Event Context*, 90.

³² Derrida, 93.

of being a degradation of language, its most essential characteristic. One implication of the generalization of writing is that the plurality internal to language renders problematic all claims to neutral intelligibility. Teachers, then, cannot unproblematically be “mouthpieces,” seamlessly transmitting “content” to students.

Furthermore, the iterability characteristic of language, Derrida argues, is also generalizable to experience more broadly. As we have noted, metaphysics, from Plato to Saussure, has imagined being to be characterized by presence. This “metaphysics of presence” resulted not only in naive versions of idealism and empiricism, but also in the instigation of an epistemological arrogance that Derrida sees as problematic. The notion that signifieds are *both* “thinkable and possible,”³³ *independent* from signifiers *and* referred to unproblematically by signifiers, is, Derrida argues, “dependent upon the onto-theo-teleology” that he aims to critique.³⁴ To complicate the simple picture of reality as presence, Derrida draws attention to the separation, the difference, that must exist *before* reality-as-presence is articulable. Just as words in a language are only differentiated in comparison to *other* words, objects of our experience are only objects by virtue of their separation from other objects. Just as, in language, it is “an impossibility that a sign...be produced within the plenitude of a present and an absolute presence,”³⁵ it is also an impossibility that presence be recognized, *as such*, without first being differentiated. Derrida calls this originary difference the “trace,” a dissimulating that “has always already begun.”³⁶ The implication is that, if the trace, rather than concepts or words, is productive of meaning, then the iterability of writing is not only characteristic of language, but also of experience in general.³⁷

The “trace” is therefore not a mere inconvenience to be mitigated, but an ontological fact. Because writing *qua* *différance* is generalizable to the entirety of existence, the possibility of perfectly immediately communicable words, or of an idyllic efficiency achieved through vigilant “best practices,” is precluded. Every communication is *already* a corruption, which, in turn, renders intrusion both normal *and therefore* nonexistent: a normalized intrusion is no longer intrusive, it simply *is*. Accordingly, education reform proposals that rely on vigilance are doomed to failure. There are no perfect words or techniques that will ensure that students acquire and retain content. We argue that a more phenomenologically accurate definition of teaching will render questions of transmission and clarity obsolete, and act as a bulwark against the appropriation of teaching for undemocratic ends. Formulating this definition, however, requires more than Derrida’s negative observation that experience is constituted by an originary difference.

³³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 79.

³⁴ Derrida, 79.

³⁵ Derrida, 75.

³⁶ Derrida, 51.

³⁷ Derrida, *Signature Event Context*, 107.

THINKING AND SPEAKING WITH HEIDEGGER

Though Derrida argues that Heidegger adheres to the “metaphysics of presence,” we argue that Heidegger preempted Derrida in several of his texts about language. Heidegger, for example, calls attention to the null “middle” that must exist between world and thing, such that the two can be “intimate.”³⁸ These two “regions,” world and thing, “do not subsist alongside one another,” but, rather, “they penetrate each other.”³⁹ The world, which Heidegger defines as the “referential whole” that remains always already meaningful, is taken for granted until a jolt of anxiety renders it conspicuous.⁴⁰ One of Heidegger’s examples is the drinking jug, which, if removed from its function as a jug, only exists as a geometrical shape of kiln-fired clay.⁴¹ The physical, geometrical properties of the clay, however, are not *constitutive* of the jug. “When we fill the jug with wine,” Heidegger asks, “do we pour the wine into the sides and into the bottom of the jug?”⁴² Since the sides and the bottom of a jug are solid clay borders, the suggestion is, upon reflection, absurd. Instead, only the emptiness of the jug, which inherently refers to the “open region” in which the jug abides, can properly receive the wine. Furthermore, the jug, considered *as* a jug, cannot be separated from its “belonging-together in the event of drinking,” in “conviviality...farewell...memory...and festival.”⁴³

Things and the world, therefore, mutually “carry out” one another.⁴⁴ Things “gather” a totalized referential whole into the “nearness” of meaningful experience.⁴⁵ There is, further, an uncanniness about this difference between world and thing, exemplified in the moments when we realize that, though things have meaning for us *now*, it could be otherwise.⁴⁶ Like ancient ruins that are now fodder for the tourism industry, rather than living, meaningful things-in-the-world, the relation between world and thing is open to revision. This precarious relationship is of the same nature as the relationship that maintains, for Derrida, between signifier and signified. Signifiers are arbitrary conventions, whose universal iterability guarantees the instability of their meaning, just as things can

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1971), 199.

³⁹ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 199.

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 63, 74. See also Martin Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 86-87.

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 84-87. For more about the “as structure,” see Martin Heidegger, *Logic: The Question of Truth*, trans. Thomas Sheehan (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁴² Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 84.

⁴³ Heidegger, 87-88.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 178.

⁴⁵ “Near” is not meant here in the sense of “proximity.” Heidegger, 175.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203.

have different meanings in different time periods and locations. Pol Vandeveldel explains that this linguistic precariousness, rather than constituting a deficiency of language, is rather the means by which we “recover the potentiality in the world.”⁴⁷ Instability and iterability are, in other words, fecund.

The challenge, in the context of questions about the word “teacher,” is to clarify how teachers are to *be*. Martin Heidegger’s reflections in *What is Called Thinking?* provide a potential clue. He begins with a defense of realism, comparing the “scientific” orientation towards a tree with the “phenomenological” orientation. The scientific orientation “records brain currents,”⁴⁸ analyzes the physical and chemical properties of trees, and determines the length of light waves that produce the colors green and brown, while the phenomenological relation asks: “does the tree stand ‘in our consciousness,’ or does it stand on the meadow? Does the meadow lie in the soul, as an experience, or is it spread out there on earth? Is the earth in our head? Or do we stand on earth?”⁴⁹ Like the naive analysis of the jug, the theoretical gaze removes the tree from everything that makes it a tree. It instead becomes hypostatized, alienated from the relational region in which the tree “trees.” *Before* allowing things to be disassembled by theory, instrumentalization, or science, we must first let them be *as* they are in the world.⁵⁰

HEIDEGGER’S PRESENCE AND DERRIDA’S DENIAL: THE NOT-TEACHER

So far, we have discussed teachers in their role as users of signs. The problem, however, is that *all* humans use signs, which means that *all* interactions are differed and deferred. What, then, differentiates the teacher from humans more broadly? What is it that is unique to being a teacher? We have seen that the GCEE’s answer is purely negative. We have also argued that this definitional negativity leaves teaching open to the threat of undemocratic political appropriation. A unique, *positive* aspect of the teacher, then, needs to be articulated. Articulating this uniqueness in terms of a vigilance towards word usage, however, is precluded, due to the structural iterability of language and experience that problematizes immanent meaning altogether. If we are to define teaching and teachers, then, while taking into consideration the Derridean and Heideggerian insights above, the relevant aspects of teacherly behavior must be shifted away from what teachers say and do to what teachers *are*.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Pol Vandeveldel, “Language as the House of Being? How to Bring Intelligibility to Heidegger While Keeping the Excitement,” *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 4 (2014): 253-262, 260.

⁴⁸ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1968), 42.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 43. For information on Heidegger’s realism, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 199.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 208.

⁵¹ John Wilson and Nicholas Wilson, “The Subject-Matter of Educational Research,” *British Educational Research Journal* 24, no. 3 (June 1998): 355-363.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1501918>.

Focusing on what teachers are means describing the ontological structure of what teachers must be if they are to participate in the instantiation of the phenomenon of learning. We argue, considering both Heidegger's insight that things in the world are first and foremost their relations (e.g., the jug—conviviality), and Derrida's insight that words and experiences are always already self-differentiated, that teachers ought to be "pointers:" teachers should be those who point students away from the teacher (and from the teacher's words) towards the ontological, relational features of the world. Students and teachers would investigate these aspects of experience as they instantiate themselves in the various curricular subjects. How might math and science, for example, be approached in a way similar to Heidegger's analysis of the jug—by foregrounding, that is, their relational and ontological aspects? How might political and historical topics be treated differently if teachers were focused not on transmitting information about Thomas Jefferson or the Civil Rights Movement, but on investigating how these are structured, constructed, and instantiated in experience? Teachers and students would investigate how our experiences of these topics are ontologically constituted, and what this constitution might mean for our interactions with the world, with things, and with each other. "Thomas Jefferson" would not refer to a historical, lifeless figure, but to an active and effective phenomenon of experience. *How* exactly the effect referred to as "Thomas Jefferson" is active in experience would be the subject of investigation: where do we experience this effect? What are its relations? How is it experienced in different places and times?

This construal of the teacher solves two problems. Firstly, the danger that, because of the nature of language and experience, teachers inevitably fail to convey immediately clear information. By redirecting their attention to things and the world, investigating them in themselves *and* as they are constituted by the ontological difference that makes them what they are, teachers and students both learn about structural iterability and circumvent the need for vigilance of the sort explained above. Educational inquiry will explicitly question why such vigilance is appealing to begin with. Secondly, this delineation of the teacher avoids the myriad political, undemocratic appropriations of the teacher characteristic of the history of education in the United States and elsewhere. If teachers are conceptualized as "those who give information to students," then the content of this information is *ipso facto* a topic of political debate. If it is acknowledged that "giving information" is both a problematic and undesirable task for teachers, however, then the possibility of "filling" this information with politically charged contents is precluded. It would be replaced by an ontological investigation into the foundations of experience, perception, language, communication, and knowledge.

One final qualification is necessary: we are not arguing for the naïve possibility of a teaching that escapes *all* aspects of the political. We acknowledge, for example, that teachers are ineradicably human, and that

humans are ineradicably political.⁵² By advocating that students and teachers explicitly investigate the difference between thing and world, we are advocating for an examination into how the political is constructed, and how it operates in experience in cognitive and noncognitive ways. As previously stated, ontological investigations are investigations into the *relations* between things and between things and the world. Put differently, the relations that constitute our experience, as well as experience itself, are brought into the scope of educational inquiry. The political will inevitably be included, albeit in an ontological, structural sense. The difference is that, instead of *providing* knowledge, information, or curricular contents, teachers will direct students toward the phenomenological experience of things as they exist in relation to the world, which means a concomitant investigation of the precarious (and political) nature of this relation. In other words, the teacher is not an instrument of information, but an ally in knowing and being with the student. Attempts at teacherly vigilance and awareness will be, consequently, a non-sequitur.

⁵² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998).

HEROES, PATRIOTIC EDUCATION, AND THE SHADOWS OF HISTORY

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The idea that children need to be exposed to stories of patriotic heroes has again surfaced in recent legislative activity surrounding education. Often, this impulse aligns with a conservative, moralizing vision of teaching history: the flaws of past historical figures should be minimized for the purposes of national pride and traditional virtues. When nations have experienced moral catastrophe, however, this impulse runs counter to the need to teach for historical truth. In this paper, I examine the link between heroes, historical truth, and patriotic education. For initial inspiration, I turn to a vision of patriotic heroism suggested by writer and historian Anne Applebaum in her analysis of Soviet oppression. After examining both the value of patriotism and the contested role of national heroes in constructing patriotism, I conclude that certain forms of patriotism can make a positive contribution to civic identity and that identification with national heroes will be an unavoidable feature of such an identity. Furthermore, Applebaum's emphasis on "heroes of resistance" allows us to balance the need for such heroes with the need to teach for historical truth.

HEROES OF RESISTANCE

When one thinks of the moral catastrophes of the last century, examples come flooding easily to mind: Auschwitz and the horrors of Nazi Germany, the Killing Fields under Pol Pot, the Great Leap Forward under Mao, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and so forth. Among the most gruesome are the terrors perpetuated under the Soviet regime, particularly under Stalin: The Red Terror, the Holodomor, mass deportations and executions, and, of course, the Gulag—all of which together have been estimated to have killed between 10-20 million people. The Gulag was not a system of death camps, like the world witnessed in Nazi Germany. It was instead a network of work camps of mindboggling brutality. These camps directly killed about three million people, and indirectly lead to the death and suffering of countless more. Anne Applebaum's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Gulag: A History*, catalogues a tiny fraction of the tragic stories from the Gulag.

In one of the last chapters of the book, Applebaum turns to the subject of historical memory. She notes that there is little desire to contemplate the Gulag in contemporary Russia and little effort to record or remember the events that transpired there. There are very few monuments or museums. There have been no trials, even for the most notorious participants. There have been no truth and reconciliation commissions, no government inquiries, no hearings, and no apologies. There has been, in short, no attempt to remember the Gulag.

Applebaum argues that the consequences of this hole in collective memory have been destructive to Russia as well as its neighboring countries.

Perhaps most interesting from the perspective of education, there has also been a forgetfulness of what could be potential national heroes. These are the heroes of resistance, those that fought back against injustice. Applebaum writes:

The incredibly rich body of Russian survivors' literature—tales of people whose humanity triumphed over the horrifying conditions of the Soviet concentration camps—should be better read, better known, more frequently quoted. If schoolchildren knew these heroes and their stories better, they would find something to be proud of even in Russia's Soviet past, aside from imperial and military triumphs.¹

Some examples of such heroes Applebaum cites are those who opposed Stalin (students like Susanna Pechora, Victor Bulgakov and Anatoly Zhigulin), those who led camp rebellions, and other dissidents (Sakharov and Orlov) imprisoned by the later Soviet regime. The heroism of such people is largely lost to the footnotes of historical monographs. They play no role in Russian education or in the construction of Russian identity. Applebaum argues that this leaves the Russian civic identity impoverished and constricted. Ignoring the dark, in effect, makes it impossible to see the light. The lack of such engagement might explain what some have claimed to be a Russian "loyal passivity" in the face of oppression and injustice, or the large-scale depoliticization of its citizens.²

Such insights from abroad should lead us to consider national identities in the U.S. historical context. After all, the US has had its own share of moral darkness, and it is a history that the American public has not fully reckoned with. Even modest attempts to expose students to the problematic side of American history have recently come under fire. The recent movement to outlaw "divisive concepts" is partly aimed at preventing the teaching of America's racist past. Missouri Senator Josh Hawley, for example, in his proposed "Love America Act," argues for effectively banning critical history. In supporting this federal legislation, he writes:

We cannot afford for our children to lose faith in the noble ideals this country was founded on. We have to make sure that our children understand what makes this country great, the ideals of hope and promise our Founding Fathers fought for, and the love of country that unites us all.³

¹ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003), 573.

² Sarah Jones, "'Russia Is Completely Depoliticized:' A Sociologist from Moscow Explains how the Nation Learned to Deny Reality," *New York Magazine* (April 7, 2022): <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/04/sociologist-greg-yudin-how-russia-learned-to-deny-reality.html>.

³ Jessica Chasmar and Andrew Murray, "Sen. Hawley introduces anti-CRT Love America Act to teach patriotism in schools," FOX News (July 26, 2021): https://www.foxnews.com/politics/sen-hawley-introduces-love-america-act?cmpid=fb_fnc.

According to this position, national unity demands a sanitized history. The necessary feelings of national attachment, the love of country, and the proper admiration for the Founding Fathers, cannot survive sustained critical examination. Thus, that examination needs to be curtailed through force of law. Under this legislation, schools using texts or lesson plans that deal with white supremacy, racism, and Critical Race Theory would be prevented from receiving federal funds. According to this view, we need to choose between critical approaches to history and patriotic attachment.

PATRIOTISM AND CIVIC IDENTITY

This contemporary conservative position assumes that patriotism is desirable, and it links these feelings to a proper regard for national heroes. Each premise here is contested. To be exact, the specific points of controversy are over (1) the desirability of patriotic sentiment in civic life, (2) the link between historical truth and patriotic sentiments, and (3) the relationship between civic identity and national heroes. The conservative position, echoed by Senator Hawley, elevates patriotism (defined in terms of loving one's country) as the primary goal of history education. The centrality of developing patriotism then drives the educational agenda and, accordingly, education becomes less concerned about unveiling the darker truths of history. A proper stance toward traditional national heroes is part of what it means to develop the proper patriotic sentiments. Respecting heroes, for people like Hawley, serves as a sort of test of patriotism. For others, the narratives surrounding such heroes provide a pattern for civic action (think of the famous myth of a young George Washington admitting to chopping down the cherry tree and how this was used to exemplify the value of honesty).

The contemporary conservative position, while perhaps distasteful to many, is somewhat mirrored in political philosophy by liberal theorists like William Galston. Galston writes:

Rigorous historical research will almost certainly vindicate complex "revisionist" accounts of key figures in American history. Civic education requires a nobler, moralizing history: a pantheon of heroes who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worthy object of emulation. It is unrealistic to believe that more than a few adult citizens of liberal societies will ever move beyond the kind of civic commitment engendered by such a philosophy.⁴

The critical search for truth, for Galston, is simply not necessary and can even be counterproductive when it comes to the basic civic education of most citizens. What citizens need is an emotional impetus to do their basic civic duties, and patriotism is that driving emotion. Heroes are an important part of this emotional motivation, and they constitute a pattern for the civic engagement. Constructing

⁴ William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 244.

this pantheon of heroes trumps historical truth or revisionist complexity. A “Socratic” education based in critical inquiry will find multiple flaws with these national heroes, diminishing their ability to motivate and model proper political action.

On the other side of the debate are those who reject the desirability of patriotism in civic life. Harry Brighouse finds little moral justification for patriotism. He defines a patriot as a person who “feels a special sense of identification with his compatriots” and who may also feel a special moral obligation to them.⁵ Brighouse finds that carving out a special moral status for those who happen to live in the same political boundaries, and perhaps placing them above others, is morally unjustified. He also finds that, while patriotism may indeed foster solidarity and acts of good citizenship, it also causes, or at least has been historically associated with, serious social problems like racism, xenophobia, and censorship. While arguing that these downsides provide schools with little positive justification for teaching patriotism, he also warns of certain dangers associated with patriotic education. Any feelings of patriotic attachment that have been engineered and manufactured in schools, rather than flowing from students’ own conclusions, will necessarily be illegitimate. He argues that an education aimed at constructing patriotism will always be tempted to willfully misrepresent history, distorting the academic subject matter. The patriotic project will necessarily shy away from certain historical facts (for example, that Woodrow Wilson was a committed racist) and misrepresent historical causation (the power of slaveholders in shaping fundamental documents like the Constitution). Contra Galston, Brighouse thinks we should value historical truth in schools more than forming sentimental national attachment. Brighouse does not specifically address projects of national heroification, but he would likely be skeptical of the whole idea based on his rejection of the larger patriotic project. One wonders, though, whether Brighouse’s definition of patriotism is overly constricted. Might other forms of patriotism fare better?

Martha Nussbaum, moving away from her previous position against patriotic education, argues that there is a form of patriotic education that is compatible with justice. The love generated by specific national attachments, when harnessed appropriately, beats the “watery motivations” that are based on abstract principles of justice.⁶ The form of patriotism she endorses is one that “repudiates orthodoxy and coercive pressure and celebrates liberties of speech and conscience.”⁷ Nussbaum has several suggestions for how to teach patriotism in schools. She mentions starting with a love of country since children must “first care about the nation and its history” to be “good dissenters in or critics of a nation.”⁸ At the same time, they must be taught a “love of historical truth, and of

⁵ Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 101.

⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Teaching Patriotism: Love and Critical Freedom,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 79, no. 1 (2012): 231-232.

⁷ Nussbaum, “Teaching Patriotism,” 230.

⁸ Nussbaum, 245.

the nation as it really is.”⁹ She criticizes those who fear that national love will be undermined by historical truth: “But really, what they are saying is that the human heart can’t stand reality, that lovers can’t stand the real bodies of those they love.”¹⁰ While poetic, I think this statement is far too glib. National darkness is not the same as a crooked nose or love handles. There are centuries of oppression to contend with, including mass murder and all manner of inflicted misery, hypocrisy, and heartbreak. A clearer statement is needed for how love of country can coexist with historical tragedy than what Nussbaum offers.

Eamon Callan adds some nuance here. First, he defends the need for patriotic sentiments. We must recognize, Callan says, the “historically embedded patterns of political thought” and reject the idea that abstract principles of justice are sufficient motivation for many citizens.¹¹ There might be abstract reasons for civic actions, but it takes more than good reasons alone to make most people care about justice. Most people do not undertake political risks for abstract reasons alone; rather, they do so because those reasons have come to deeply resonate on an emotional level. This resonance, Callan says, comes from how the principles of justice connect to our own life stories and traditions. The example Callan uses here, namely, a nineteenth-century abolitionist, Theodore Parker, being inspired by his revolutionary forebearers, indicates that he partly has in mind the power of civic role models and the inspiration that can be taken from heroes of the past. An overly critical approach destroys the motivational power of civic exemplars—their flaws are exposed and their hypocrisies revealed. At the same time, Callan criticizes Galston’s type of patriotic education that is overly sentimental and ignores historical truth in elevating its pantheon. Such an education impairs civic self-knowledge and constricts the political imagination as citizens ignore places where their nation—and their heroes—could have been better.

This facing-up to historical truth, however, seems to leave little room for national heroes when national histories are crowded with injustice. In response to this worry, Callan argues that we can have a patriotic history education without “bad faith”—without, in other words, ignoring the truths of history. The first key is to focus on patriotism as concern for the wellbeing of a community (rather than, say, the glorification of a state).¹² The second is that we should possess a certain emotional generosity to the past, allowing human beings to be flawed.¹³ The third is that citizens may focus on “what is best” in a community, and its heroes, rather than on what is dominant.¹⁴ This all seems

⁹ Nussbaum, “Teaching Patriotism,” 248.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, 249

¹¹ Eamon Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 116.

¹² Eamon Callan, “Patriotism Without Bad Faith,” *Philosophy of Education* (2011): 1-8. <https://educationjournal.web.illinois.edu/archive/index.php/pes/article/view/3243.pdf>.

¹³ Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 115.

¹⁴ Callan, 119.

wise. Yet, at the same time, like Nussbaum, Callan does not seem to realize that there comes a point where emotional generosity and historical imagination, and focusing on what is best about something or somebody, seems like a rather desperate and unconvincing project in the face of deeply flawed historical personalities. There may have been good qualities to Woodrow Wilson, someone who was once deemed a sort of national hero, and we can certainly allow for some degree of human frailties, but a man so consumed in racial animosity and hypocritical violence cannot be salvaged no matter the benefit to civic motivation. Different heroes are needed altogether.

FUNCTIONS OF CIVIC EXEMPLARS

Nussbaum, Callan, and Galston are correct in finding a place for patriotism in civic life, and they all recognize a need for civic role models to provide motivation. If anything, they probably underrate the importance. Indeed, such exemplars seem to play an inescapable role in human thought and action, and we could not escape their influence even if that was our inclination.¹⁵ Looking at the basic biology of the brain, for example, it appears that it is geared toward imitation. This is shown on the basic neuronal level with the discovery of what have been called “mirror neurons,” neurons that fire both when viewing an action performed by another and when we ourselves do the same action.¹⁶ The human mind is highly responsive to the actions of others. When we see or contemplate other people doing something, we seem to simulate ourselves doing the action at the same time. This seems to “grease” the neural pathways and facilitate both human empathy and imitation of the action on the part of the observer. While the link between observation and action is not completely understood, it at least seems sensible to surround students with images and stories of people promoting the civic good.

Presenting students with examples of human action does several things. As Callan suggests, examples personalize certain abstract principles and draw people into a common story. In some doing, these exemplars seem to say, “This is who we are,” and they invite students to be part of a larger, ongoing story. Exemplars also provide a motivating function by making certain actions appear as real possibilities. Human exemplars in this sense serve as a proof of concept: if someone else can act in such a way, then so can I. This is even more important when diverse identities are at play and the match between the example and observer becomes acute: if someone *like me* can act in this way, then so can I. Stories of exemplary actions need to go beyond white, male, canonical heroes. A diverse set of heroes can expand the vision of possibilities.

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of the topics of imitation and exemplarity in education see Bryan R. Warnick, *Imitation and Education: A Philosophical Inquiry into Learning by Example* (Ithaca, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Jonah Lehrer, “The Mirror Neuron Revolution: Explaining What Makes Humans Social: Interview with Marco Iacoboni,” *Scientific American* (2008): <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-mirror-neuron-revolution/>.

Examples not only show that action is possible, but they also provide specific patterns for action. They show people what to do, given the story that they are participating in. They show how various civic virtues—bravery, honesty, responsiveness, compassion, empathy—can be enacted in the face of real-world problems. They also show what sorts of problems need to be addressed and how to maneuver in the face of opposition. Students might learn to express civic virtues through, for example, consistent voting, through whistleblowing an injustice, or through sustained acts of civil disobedience. Civic heroes can promote positive patterns of action.

One of the fairly hidden national exemplars that comes to mind here is Charles Hamilton Houston, Dean of Howard Law School and first special counsel to the NAACP.¹⁷ Houston was the primary intellectual force behind the legal strategy that eventually overthrew *Plessy v. Ferguson* and ended legalized segregation of public services. He pushed the doctrine of “separate but equal,” formalized in *Plessy*, to its breaking point, showing in courts how separate but equal could never actually be obtained. Educational institutions, schools and universities, became the primary vehicle he used to demonstrate this point, building a series of legal precedents that led to the *Brown* decision in 1954. Houston’s dogged determination and work ethic in the cause of justice is notable among those that know his story—he literally worked himself to death seeking equality, refusing to slow down in the face of health problems. Now, however, his story is not widely known, even though his life exemplifies determined work to overcome injustice. Examples like this can serve as models for imitation.

Finally, exemplification and imitation play important roles in the formation of communities of action. Imitative action draws people closer to each other—this happens even early in life, as parents and infants build relationships by imitating facial expressions and noises. Imitative community-building continues into adolescence and adulthood, as people build communities by following trends and fashions. Social psychologists have found that imitative actions increase people’s positive regard for each other—indeed, servers in restaurants who “imitate” their customers received higher tips.¹⁸ To be sure, the communities that such imitative behavior creates can be conservative and civically destructive, for example, by forming mobs that enforce oppressive structures. But they have also been essential to mass movements working for social change. Imitative behavior can be seen across the political spectrum, from collectively wearing Che Guevara T-shirts to using slogans exalting perceived heroic behavior (“Nevertheless, she persisted”). Whether on the level of a small group of activists, or at the level of multi-generational national culture, the formation of communities is an essential part of collective action. Identifying

¹⁷ Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Rick B van Baaren, Rob W Holland, Bregje Steenaert, and Ad van Knippenberg, “Mimicry for Money: Behavioral Consequences of Imitation,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39, no. 4 (2003): 393–98.

with heroes and imitating their actions can help individuals feel connected to each other. For all of these reasons, it is important, as Applebaum suggests, that we get these heroes right.

CIVIC EXEMPLARS AND THE DARK TRUTHS OF HISTORY

There were, I suggested, at least three areas of contestation when it comes to heroes and history: (1) the desirability of patriotism, (2) the link between historical truth and patriotism, and (3) the relationship between patriotism and national heroes. Some, like Brighouse, deny the desirability of patriotism. Others, like Galston, affirm patriotism, but deny that it must be compatible with historical truth. Nussbaum and Callan, in contrast, suggest that patriotism (understood correctly) is a significant and desirable moral emotion while also affirming that it must be compatible with historical truth and free from bad faith. Personal identification with the past plays a part of energizing abstract principles of justice and motivating civic action. For both Callan and Nussbaum, identification with heroes is a part of this process, and they both suggest that national identity would be impoverished without them. In addition, I have provided further reasons to support the idea that exemplars play an important part in human action and identity formation. This all aligns with Applebaum's critique of Russian national forgetfulness.

Nussbaum and Callan, however, both offer accounts of history and heroism that sometimes involve looking past grave imperfections in search of national identification. Nussbaum talks of loving through the imperfections, while Callan encourages a historical imagination, generosity, and focusing on "what is best." It is true, of course, that asking for moral perfection will end in disappointment. But within the context of national moral catastrophe, these attempts to look past moral failure can be unconvincing. The context of moral darkness and the stench of hypocrisy undermines their psychological power to inform and inspire. Rather than exercising an unconvincing historical generosity, then, there exists a need to continually find new civic heroes.

Where are we to find such exemplars in light of a critical history, which will necessarily uncover failure and hypocrisy? Can an honest, critical approach to history leave us with appropriate national heroes, or will we be left with a pantheon of selfish, hypocritical, moral cowards rather than worthy objects of emulation? This is where Applebaum's idea becomes particularly helpful: While an honest investigation of the Gulag, she argues, will certainly uncover a great deal of national darkness, it will also uncover stories of those who resisted. These stories can form the basis of a national pride and identification that is compatible with justice. Let us consider the premises of this argument more closely.

1. *Under conditions of national moral catastrophe, there will be people who resist.* This premise is not a logical truth, to be sure: one can imagine situations of great injustice that evoke no moral resistance. Still, as a psychological or sociological generalization, it seems that resistance will regularly accompany the use of abusive power. Indeed, such resistance has accompanied all historical instances of national moral catastrophe that I am aware of.

2. *A critical history will by its nature uncover these stories, bringing them to national consciousness.* This is true. Any complete accounting of a moral catastrophe will document the resistance to that catastrophe, describing that resistance, listing who participated, recording what was done and what the outcome was. Leaving out such stories would make the history incomplete. A complete accounting of the darkness is necessary for the true heroic nature of the action to be appreciated. In this sense, only a truly critical history can show citizens at their best.
3. *These stories will, in general, contain laudable accounts of civic action.* This is true, but complex. Resistance to oppression is, as a general category, a laudable civic action. It reveals civic courage, concern for others, and a concern for justice. There is much to be taken from such examples, and individuals can take pride in being part of a national story that displays such virtues. There are times when such resistance itself may overstep moral boundaries, however, making the heroic identification much more complicated. Often, but not always, that line is lethal violence, particularly when perpetuated against civilians. The Irish Republicans who bombed civilian targets during the “The Troubles” of Northern Ireland overstepped such boundaries, even while having legitimate complaints against British rule.
4. *Therefore, these stories can provide the basis for national heroes even within a context of national moral catastrophe.* Assuming there was a resistance to the oppression, then, and that the resistance was itself within certain moral norms, this seems like a sound argument, and it suggests a potential productive avenue for a history education that is both patriotic and critical.

This type of heroification aligns with Nussbaum’s view of heroes as dissenters. It also fits nicely within Callan’s framework for an appropriate patriotism and avoids Brighouse’s criticism. That is, these actions are specific and focused—resisting the moral evil of political oppression—and are therefore centered on promoting the community good. This is not a matter of moral prioritization, of putting one’s national community *above* others, as Brighouse would worry about; it is about resisting evil without one’s own community. The historical inquiry is not being sanitized for the sake of civic projects; rather, the honest and critical approach to history is itself generating the objects of appropriate civic attachment. Academic truth is not sacrificed for patriotic ends. And none of this requires that the exemplars are perfect, only that their specific actions to resist oppression are worthy of national pride.

Talking about it in this way, the educational focus seems to be on the heroic *action* as the example to follow rather than the example of heroic *person*. In that sense, it may be deflating to the notion of national heroes, who are embodied examples of a nation’s best. Indeed, it is true that the actions of

resistance are probably the appropriate point of emphasis. At the same time, no human action is unconnected from the person who acts. For students to learn the appropriate civic lesson requires some sense of the person doing the heroic action. For example, it seems helpful for students to know that many of the people who resisted oppression were not larger-than-life superheroes, but ordinary, imperfect folks, going about their daily lives. The civic lesson that “resisting oppression is *my* job” is inseparable from the larger life-stories taken as whole. For this reason, the focus should not simply be on actions, but actions within larger narratives: stories not only of the action, but of who acted and why.

Putting it all together, it seems that these types of civic heroes, the heroes of resistance that Applebaum describes, can play a positive role in civic life. Recall the functions of civic exemplars I previously outlined. These stories allow educators to put something in front of students that is both honest and uplifting, being responsive to the inner human impulse to imitate. These stories give students worthy objects of national pride, which often revolve around ordinary people who resisted oppression, thus saying to them, “You too can do this.” Because these civic heroes are resisting injustice, they set a pattern for civic work. They invite students to resist injustice and show civic virtues of courage, honesty, compassion, and so forth. They also invite students into traditions and communities of action, connecting them with people they can work with to create a more just world. Focusing on uncovering these resisters shows how we can work within the processes of exemplification and imitation that play such a powerful role in human life.

CONCLUSION

Those politicians, like Senator Hawley, who believe that children would benefit from an emotional connection to their political communities are not entirely misguided—some sort of “love of country,” some sort of historically grounded civic identity, might have productive civic consequences. The mistake is believing that this requires rejecting revisionist or critical approaches to history. As Applebaum suggests, these critical approaches might actually serve to reveal the heroes, the heroic resisters, that can foster both a national pride and a grounded civic identity that is compatible with justice. Human beings will unavoidably look for people to imitate. The task of education is to find the right exemplars—people whose actions work toward justice. Critical history does not impede this task, it facilitates it.

STRETCHING THE TRUTH: LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN EDUCATION

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In *Religion and American Education*, Warren Nord grapples with one of the most difficult aspects of teaching religion: how to help American students, whose religious literacy tends to be severely impoverished, understand religious experience. While Nord's overall goal is to incorporate the critical examination of religion into the curriculum as a whole, he argues that any serious endeavor to do this cannot exclude teaching the personal aspects of faith and belief: "If we truly want to understand religion, if we want to take it seriously, then we must...open our hearts to religious experience,"¹ he writes. Unless we help students get "inside" religion, we fail to take it seriously as a discipline, and, thus, fail to open productive dialogue among a diverse and democratic citizenship.² Getting inside religion, however, is a tricky pedagogical feat, as we don't want to coerce students into attending a church or religious service.³ We therefore need to find a "substitute" for religious experience, and it is Nord's pedagogical proposal here that I find particularly interesting. He writes that "The best substitute for firsthand personal religious experience is autobiographical or literary accounts of such experience."⁴ Narrative language, he claims, "has the power to recreate experiences," which allows us access to the emotional parts of religion.⁵ Nord goes on to call out autobiography in particular, separating it from literary narratives and grouping it with apology, scripture, and theology. He stipulates that like these latter three genres, autobiography "may not operate imaginatively" but still "gives students a sense of what it is to think religiously."⁶

I find Nord's argument in support of religious education provocative and important. While his proposal to assign autobiography as part of religious education comprises only a small part of his overall study, I want to take it seriously, in part because it is a genre frequently proposed by other educational theorists to accomplish a variety of pedagogical aims. In a recent article, James Southworth encourages assigning autobiographical texts as a method of bringing

¹ Warren Nord, *Religion and American Education* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 218.

² Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 235.

³ Nord, 218.

⁴ Nord, 219.

⁵ Nord, 219.

⁶ Nord, 220.

students to a state of productive doubt.⁷ Hub Zwart suggests in a 2015 article that science autobiographies can be useful for better understanding nuances about life sciences research.⁸ I wholeheartedly agree with these scholars, as well as with Nord, that reading autobiography can be a powerful and productive way to improve student learning in a variety of contexts. However, it is out of my admiration for this complex literary genre that I also want to qualify the uses to which it is put in educational contexts.⁹ I argue that there are two main limitations with assigning autobiography as a tool to teach something outside the context of the literature classroom. The limitations include the following: first, assuming that autobiography can be assigned as a conduit for affective experience precludes attention to its generic boundaries and affordances, which threatens and limits any pedagogical aim. Second, using one person's personal narrative to represent a religion's experiential aspects can distort the understanding of the religion as a whole. In order to ground the discussion, I weave autobiographical theory throughout my argument. I conclude with a brief consideration of how these arguments might be extrapolated for educators who want to use autobiography to teach content or skills in non-literary disciplines.

THE LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF GENRE

The first problem I identify—teaching autobiography without attention to genre—immediately requires a clarification on the literary status of autobiography. Nord actually separates autobiography from literature, grouping it with non-literary genres such as apology and theology,¹⁰ and then states that these genres “may not operate imaginatively.”¹¹ These two tenets—that autobiography is non-imaginative and non-literary—comprise a common misunderstanding of the genre. Although autobiography studies as a discipline has done much since the publication of Nord's book to establish autobiography's generic particularities and its literary status, its literary qualities are still often ignored or misunderstood. The risk of ignoring autobiography's literary status and generic features is that it will be mistakenly read as a transparent, historical, and factual record of someone's life. But autobiography should be read not as biographical fact but as literature, with all its attendant slippery relations to truth. As long-time autobiography scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson remark, “To reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of

⁷ James Southworth, “Bridging Critical Thinking and Transformative Learning: The Role of Perspective-Taking,” *Theory and Research in Education* 20, no. 1 (2022): 44-63.

⁸ Hub Zwart, “The Third Man: Comparative Analysis of a Science Autobiography and a Cinema Classic As Windows into Post-War Life Sciences Research,” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 37, no.4 (2015): 328-412.

⁹ In this paper, I focus only on the pedagogical implications of reading autobiographical texts, rather than writing them (about which much more has been written).

¹⁰ It could be argued that some apology is literary as well, but Nord here seems to be referencing critical apologist arguments.

¹¹ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 220.

rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions.”¹² So what makes autobiography a nonfiction genre that should be read with a distinct, literary framework rather than through a purely historical or factual lens?

To be sure, the boundaries between literary nonfiction and general, non-literary nonfiction are blurry and imperfect; nonfiction genres might be more productively understood along a spectrum of literariness rather than divided by hard lines. Those that are typically considered less literary, like newspaper journalism or history textbooks, employ fewer literary devices; employ facts for information-driven and knowledge-proving rhetorical purposes; and have a narrator who is placed farther outside the main action of the text. Those that are more literary, like autobiography, essays, and literary journalism, engage a broader range of literary devices, such as metaphor, characterization, allusions, imagery, and irony; employ facts for a multitude of rhetorical purposes, from self-justification to self-knowledge to creating shared meanings of a life; and have a narrator who is placed within or close to the action of the text. Judged along this spectrum, autobiography is a distinct, literary genre because of how it employs facts in pursuit of subjective “truth;” because of its systematic incorporation of literary devices not as mere dressing to the narrative, but as an integral part of the structural whole; and because it involves a host of narrative complexities due to the autobiographical “I.” Some of these generic features will be discussed more in depth below; for now, they point to the fact that autobiographical narratives are complex, literary texts, and, as such, they “require reading practices that engage the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts” that this genre entails.¹³ Misunderstanding autobiography as a straightforward, nonliterary, unimaginative record may predispose someone to read it as such, neglecting the necessary interpretive frameworks that all literature demands.

All this said, however, if our primary goal in teaching autobiography is to invite students to “get inside” religion, why should it matter in this particular educational context that autobiography achieves literary status or has generic conventions at all? In light of Nord’s goal, it might seem like the less we use a literary framework to understand a text, the better. Put another way, if our primary goal is to *experience* a text—to feel the emotive power of it—then the critical distance that a literary interpretive approach necessitates seems antithetical, one that invites distance and analysis rather than emotion and feeling. I argue, though, that in educational contexts, it is both unlikely and undesirable that students engage in the affective appreciation of a text without the complementary act of critiquing it. A student reader is always going to approach a text with some sort of framework, because the educational context in which it is assigned is itself a framework through which they read. Educational

¹² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 13.

¹³ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 13.

contexts prime students to read for a purpose: students often (even if misguided) read to “find meaning” or to note answers to a teacher’s preformed questions. Thus, a student almost always encounters an assigned text with an agenda, even if that agenda is formed from unconscious assumptions. And even if, in private reading, a student experiences a text more emotionally than analytically, once it becomes the topic of discussion and interpretation in the classroom, the student is drawn into a critical approach. It would be rare, then, if a teacher assigned literature with no expectation beyond a student’s experiential encounter with it. Moreover, it would be problematic to do so because the experience we may have with an assigned work of literature is not the end goal. Instead, the end goal is usually more related to the ability to think critically, a crucial aspect of liberal education. Nord’s project is sympathetic to critical thinking, as he places his own goal of getting inside religion as a necessary part of the much larger project of holistic religious education. In fact, he advances the notion that productive critique and analysis include the consideration of personal experience. Students have to both experience *and* critique religion in order “to make judgments, to conclude, however tentatively, that some ways of thinking and living are better or worse than others.”¹⁴ It seems correct, then, that while the primary goal in assigning autobiography is to get students to appreciate the affective domains of religion, it would be both improbable and disagreeable if this were the sole outcome of a student reading a book like Augustine’s *Confessions*. We might want them to feel, along with Augustine, the intensity of remorse and the spiritual deliberation that led to conversion, but to complete the pedagogical project, we would certainly want students to do more: to reflect on Augustine’s experiences and interpretations, and on their own reaction to the text. Using an appropriate literary framework provides them with tools for productive reflection.

To recap briefly, I’ve established that autobiography is a distinct, literary genre, and have argued that when students read literature, they both experience the narrative as well as critique the narrative. Assuming that both of these arguments stand, we arrive at the pedagogical limitations incurred when autobiography is assigned with the misguided assumption that it can be taught exclusively, or even primarily, for the purpose of conveying the affective domains of religion (or any subject). When we teach a book assuming the affective experience of reading is sufficient for our larger goals, we neglect to critically engage the unique features of autobiography. Without engaging these features, autobiography is more likely to be read as a transparent narrative of a personal, historical past, rather than as a genre with particular affordances and boundaries that contribute to the meaning-making strategies of the text.

Reading autobiography without attention to these generic conventions limits and problematizes the pedagogical project, because genre is a crucial framework in literary analysis. In her groundbreaking work on genre theory, Carolyn Miller argues in “Genre as Social Action” that genre is more than just a

¹⁴ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 201.

set of conventions; it is rhetorically and socially motivated, and examining various genres' rhetorical features can help us understand our historical and cultural moment.¹⁵ Genre theory as a discipline has much more to say about this idea, but the salient point here is that genre matters when assigning autobiography, even when our aim lies outside of genre studies, like when we want students to get a sense of what it is to feel and think religiously. Unless we engage the autobiographical genre as a critical framework, we risk reading the text superficially, with attention only for the main storyline and emotional resonances, instead of considering how and why the affective experience is created for the reader, and what social actions the text may be making. Finally, as a genre that claims a higher truth value than fiction, autobiography might justify an even greater demand on our critical attention than genres that do not make claims to truth—particularly in our present post-truth age. After all, while we certainly do want to open our minds and hearts to the perspectives of others, we also don't want to accept all perspectives uncritically. In neglecting a generic framework when we assign autobiography, we have a far greater risk of our students encountering the text at a superficial level (limiting the pedagogical project), or, at worst, having them misread and misconstrue a text (threatening the pedagogical project).

To avoid these limitations, teaching with autobiography necessitates an appropriate generic framework to guide students' interpretations of the text. First, autobiography needs to be viewed as an imaginative, literary genre, rather than a factual, historical record. In an educational context like Nord's, where autobiography is assigned to help students understand religious experience, reading the genre without attention to its literary form introduces immediate problems. After all, reading the Bible as a record of fact results in very different outcomes than reading it as literature. While hardly an equally extreme case, something similar can be said for autobiography. In this genre, an author does not offer their religious experiences with the sole purpose of getting their readers to feel what they felt. They offer experiences as part of a larger argument of why they stayed, or left, or converted into a religious tradition—in other words, they make an argument as to what their past *means*; and they make it within the conventions of a socially-situated genre. If we consider the difference of assigning autobiography as a nonimaginative text about one person's religious experience, and assigning an autobiography as an artistic negotiation of subjective truth that makes use of certain generic affordances, we begin to see how different the outcomes are for student readers. The reader, in focusing on an autobiography as a record of "what happened," minimizes it as a narrative of interpretation. This reader may view the narrated experiences as raw material, rather than as memories that have been selected, interpreted, negotiated, and presented for maximum rhetorical effect. We might compare this to reading a

¹⁵ Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (May 1984): 151-167.

common history textbook, where even when “what happened” can be verified by eyewitness accounts, an interpretive stance colors every sentence and, yet is often imperceptible to an unpracticed eye. Perspective becomes encoded within the text and taken as *the* perspective, *the* way of knowing, while other viewpoints and interpretations are invisible or ignored. A reader may overestimate the autobiography’s truth value, not recognizing the interpretative stances, cultural and historical discourses, and literary frameworks within which the narrative operates. This is to say that the content and the form of any text are inseparable; when religious autobiographies are mistaught and misread, it is often because the content is either separated from the form, or the form is misconstrued. Form and content are inextricably linked and should be taught as interconnected and interdependent, and read for the ways they shape each other.

To exemplify both the importance of exploring the generic conventions when teaching autobiography and the necessity of connecting form and content, I’ll take a brief look at the concept of autobiographical truth. Autobiographical truth is one of the most unique and important aspects of autobiography, a theoretical concept of the genre the exploration of which opens up possibilities to enhance student learning when assigning a text like a religious autobiography. Truth in autobiography is premised on what Philip Lejeune has called an “autobiographical pact” that exists between author and reader.¹⁶ The basic concept of this pact is that it promises the reader that the author on the cover is the same person as both the narrator and the protagonist in the text; and that the reader can trust that the story is “true.” When public scandals concerning autobiography break out, the anger from audiences is a reaction to this pact being broken—the author has often fabricated huge lies and claimed them as truth. This autobiographical pact affects our reading of the text, sometimes in the direction of the above-mentioned misunderstanding: we read with the assumption that what we are reading is factual and/or true. But autobiographical truth is one of the genre’s most elastic affordances: while the pact fairly promises truth to a reader, it also invites readers to adjust their expectations about truth itself. Rather than ensuring fact or transparency, the pact actually urges readers to ask: to what kind of truth do we expect the author’s fidelity? The truth of biographical fact? An honest account of self-understanding? A fair representation of their cultural and historical moment? A faithful narration of their memories? And what does it mean for a reader’s understanding of truth when the honestly told remembrance of an event cannot be verified by other witnesses? What does it mean when an autobiographer knowingly employs lies and fictions in the pursuit of truth, as Lauren Slater does in her memoir *Lying*? How is truth status affected when facts are massaged and tweaked in order to better convey the author’s meaning, a

¹⁶ Phillippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *The Routledge Auto|Biography Studies Reader*, ed. Ricia Anne Chancy and Emily Hipchen (New York, NY: Routledge, [1975] 2016): 34-48.

technique writer John D'Agata describes as "taking liberties," and his fact-checker Jim Fingal calls "telling lies?"¹⁷

In answer to some of these questions, Smith and Watson theorize autobiographical truth not as a confirmation or invalidation of objective truth, but, instead, as residing "in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life."¹⁸ In other words, truth in autobiography is arrived at not by the writer alone, but by the engagement of the reader in the truth claims and truth-making strategies of the narrative. To arrive at this shared understanding of a life, both reader and writer must engage in interpretation. This is why the autobiographical pact must not be accepted passively or uncritically by readers, as is done when reading the genre as non-literary or solely for the aim of feeling the writer's experience; instead, the pact needs to be actively engaged. The content of autobiography is purportedly true and factual, but it is the *form* of autobiography that constructs the very concept of truth. Attention to the interplays of truth, narrative, and intersubjective exchange primes students to view the text as an artistic, literary argument, which will allow them to read for encoded patterns of belief.

These encoded patterns of belief underly the autobiographical text not only in the interplays of truth but also through the narrator's relation of experience. Recall that Nord proposed autobiographical narratives as "the best substitute for firsthand personal religious experience,"¹⁹ because getting students to experience religion non-coercively was one of the most important elements of a religious curriculum for Nord. But experience, like truth, cannot be taken at face value in an autobiographical narrative. Smith and Watson suggest that experience in an autobiographical narrative "is already an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific moment."²⁰ It is, in other words, what we use to constitute ourselves as subjects. In addition, because autobiography is a kind of artistic argument that claims high truth value, narrators have a stake in persuading their readers that their experience is authoritative in some way. A student reading autobiography would benefit from considering how a narrator constructs identity and authority through their written interpretation of the past. In this way, students can be introduced to the nuances of experience as a concept: the claims to authority it makes, the ways cultural and personal discourses of interpretation affect both the experiences we have and our assignation of meaning to those experiences. When we use an autobiography to teach religious experience in particular, discussing the nature of experience itself is just as important as teaching the religious dimensions of it. Autobiography read within its generic features, then, invites students to explore the nuances and complexities of both truth and experience. Part of what I want to suggest here is that when Nord claims autobiography as the best substitute for

¹⁷ John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (New York, NY: Norton, 2012).

¹⁸ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 16.

¹⁹ Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 219.

²⁰ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 31.

religious experience, he stopped short of exploring just how much it could teach a student about religion. Personal narratives allow us a window into other people's experiences, but they also invite us to critique the very ideas of truth and experience—two concepts that are elemental in the study of religion.

THE LIMITATIONS OF REPRESENTATION

The last qualification I would like to offer when assigning autobiography to teach religious experience is that using one person's personal narrative to stand in for the religious experience of an entire sect can distort the understanding of the religion as a whole. To illustrate this, I'll look briefly at two autobiographies written in recent years about the Mormon faith. In 2019, Tara Westover's *Educated* was published about growing up in a fundamentalist Mormon family; her personal and educational experiences led her to leave religion completely. In 2012, Joanna Brooks's *Book of Mormon Girl* told the story of a more traditional Mormon experience and the author's complicated relationship with her faith, which she chose to remain close to despite her reservations. The same year, Ayse Hitchins's memoir *The Worth of a Soul* came out through a Mormon publisher, detailing the spiritual experiences that led her to convert from Islam to Mormonism. While each book may represent each author's honest experience of being part of the same faith, they also each leave large holes in the treatment of Mormon religious experience. Reading one of these memoirs might accomplish Nord's primary aim: a student can feel, along with Brooks, a cathartic influence of prayer, or with Westover, a sense of expansiveness on leaving. While these are potentially valuable readings, they are also limiting. To represent Mormon religious experience through only one of these perspectives necessarily neglects a range of experiences that constitute other possibilities of how it feels to be Mormon. For readers who know little about the Mormon faith, they may walk away with a distorted, partial view of the varieties of experience within this complex religion.

In addition to the limitations of representation inherent to the genre of autobiography, the publishing industry itself further problematizes comprehensive representation. The very selection of narratives an educator can choose from is limited from the start—by who chooses to write them, who chooses to publish them, and then by the various mechanisms in the publishing world that gatekeep, edit, and promote them. Often, the more sensational and uncommon someone's religious experience, the more likely it is to not only find a publisher but also to make it on to bestseller lists, which skews the available narratives of religious experience toward the unusual.²¹

While educators cannot control the selection of available autobiographies, one possible avenue to provide a more complex view of religious experience is to offer multiple perspectives through a variety of

²¹ For a full discussion of the complexities of publishers' production of memoirs, see Julie Rak, *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, UK: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).

works—several excerpts of different books, for example, or an array of personal essays about religious experience. Beyond offering a greater variety of experiences, this approach also invites students to contrast and compare both the experiences being conveyed as well as the interpretations the authors forward. Another way to avoid this limitation and use autobiography to its fullest extent to teach religious experience is to again look at the generic conventions of autobiography. In this case, examining the construction of the narrative self in particular will allow a student to tease apart the narrator's individual experience and the representation of the group to which the author claims belonging. Asking students to consider how a narrator constructs their subjectivity—the ways they portray their thoughts and actions, the justifications they offer, the tone and language they use—invites students to consider how textual strategies offer a specific representation of both the narrator and the religious group.

Charles Altieri notes that when it comes to autobiographical subjectivity, there is an all-too-common impulse in autobiographers to “compose versions of a self...that will confirm [their] reality as desirable.”²² In other words, autobiographers employ moral vocabularies, and often ones that emphasize productive conversion (whether towards a religion or away from it) and the triumph of will over circumstances. Situated in an educational setting, students may pick up on these moral vocabularies readily, primed as they are to read books for didactic lessons rather than for aesthetic value or literary nuance. Religious autobiographies in particular are prone to this danger of making a narrator's choices look desirable, as they may be motivated to justify a conversion of some kind. A student reader should learn to look critically at the narrator, to determine how they use these moral vocabularies in constructing the self: what interpretations they employ, what arguments are they making about themselves, about experience, about the individual writ large. Reading in this critical fashion takes emphasis off the narrator as representative of a religion, and places emphasis on what Altieri calls the “qualities of consciousness” that an autobiographer employs.²³ Ultimately, Altieri sees these qualities of consciousness as one of the most promising features of autobiography, because a narrator who has an open, introspective stance towards experience can “stay open to the import of those experiences.”²⁴ This is something we might hope our students, too, are able to do as they consider the complexities of religious experience. As they read autobiography to feel, understand, and critique religious experience, we can hope they adopt the productive, conscientious stances that effective autobiographers take toward their own lives: to consider, appreciate, and evaluate experience, but also to remain open to its meaning, interpretations, and limitations.

²² Charles Altieri, “Autobiography and the Limits of Moral Criticism,” in *The Routledge Auto|Biography Studies Reader*, ed. Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen (New York, NY: Routledge): 224.

²³ Altieri, “Autobiography,” 227.

²⁴ Altieri, 227.

While the observations and arguments I've offered here speak to considerations in teaching religion, they can be extrapolated to any course of study that assigns an autobiography as a way of teaching something other than literary principles. A course in counseling, for example, might assign a memoir about grief for a purpose similar to Nord's: to offer students an opportunity to read about loss to better understand and appreciate an important experience of human life. The possibilities here for students are great: they can feel empathy or compassion, examine human expressions of grief, imagine possibilities for counseling interventions, and more. But the limitations of autobiography are equally important. Not all experiences of grief are alike, and students may benefit from a variety of grief narratives in order to understand nuanced differences. Similarly, reading within genre frameworks is important: without discussing how the narrativization of grief constructs the experience of it, or what kinds of autobiographical truths and moral vocabularies are at stake, students might miss important subtleties about how the narrator presents both themselves and larger arguments about grief and healing.

If we can assign autobiography with attention to both its literary generic affordances and its limitations of large-scale representation, then I believe it has the potential to be an incredible pedagogical tool. Perhaps this is especially true when it comes to teaching about religious experience. Not only because autobiography allows an inside view of personal experience in a way few other genres can, but for another, more interesting reason as well: assessing the truth claims of an autobiographical narrative is not unlike wrestling with some aspects of religious truth. Like autobiography, religion makes truth claims through specific narratives and interpretative frameworks to arrive at an overarching meaning of life. An important aspect of personal religious experience, and a fundamental tenet of the academic discipline of religion, is negotiating the meaning that emerges from truth claims that cannot be verified. And negotiating that meaning religiously often involves an intersubjective exchange between religious practitioner and a person or object of religious authority. While it is certainly stretching the metaphor too far to say that reading autobiography is akin to reading scripture (though Nord himself lumps these together), it does seem that when students of autobiography take on the challenge of adjusting their expectations of truth, they are engaging in parallel with a common type of religious experience: asking what truth is, how it can be known, on whose authority it is considered truth, and, perhaps most importantly, how it changes their ways of being in the world. Unlike fiction—which invites the suspension of belief—autobiography asks every reader to believe, to adjust our expectations of belief, and, finally, to interpret our lives accordingly.
