

Why We Shouldn't Be Too Cool for School

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Emily Wenneborg and I agree on almost every substantive claim she makes in her paper.¹ We agree that cultivating dispositions of pluralism is desirable and that dispositions that favor pluralism can be cultivated in different ways and by a range of institutions, both public and private. We agree that, although schools that highly value pluralism are *likely* to promote students' pluralistic dispositions, they are *not necessary* to cultivate the dispositions of pluralism, in part because students can learn these dispositions elsewhere. Relatedly, we agree that young people's education takes place throughout their waking lives—in school and out, within the home, in churches and temples, on the street, among groups of friends, at orchestra practice, and so forth. We agree that contestation over children's formal schooling—who should control it, how, for what ends—is highly divisive and raises people's stress levels enormously. We both believe that it would be better if we could find a way to ratchet down these tensions, as they simultaneously reflect and exacerbate broader patterns of democratic discord in society, risking at the extreme the breakdown of democratic pluralism and co-governance overall. We agree that, in part because of this contestation (but also for other reasons), schools that serve children and families who embrace a wide array of political, moral, and cultural beliefs and practices are often sites of strife; we also are in accord that, in part as a result of such strife (but also for other reasons), schools that highly value pluralism do not always succeed in cultivating pluralistic dispositions. We both think it would be wonderful to have a system of schooling that offered a consistent and multifaceted formation for pluralism while ideally also making space for individual schools to draw from a wide variety of traditions and value systems. And we agree that there should be a pluralistic range of schools available to students that embody a wide array of school cultures, pedagogical approaches and philosophies, substantive foci, and affiliations with other institutions (for example, religious institutions, organizations like Montessori or International Baccalaureate, the military, and so on).²

Given that I agree with so much of what Wenneborg has written, does

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this mean that I am inclined to “cool it” and embrace “structural pluralism in education” as she conceptualizes it? No. Or, more precisely, I want to argue that Wenneborg’s own arguments should lead her to embrace *my* account of state-regulated structural pluralism in education and to reject some of the other accounts she offers of “structural pluralism in education” as an ideal.

I distinguish among these conceptualizations because, by my count, her paper includes at least six different possible definitions of “structural pluralism of institutions.” These range from one definition that I would totally embrace as a matter of educational policy—“when different institutions of the same type co-exist in the same sphere,” such as Montessori, Expeditionary Learning, and Core Knowledge schools—to conceptualizations that I totally reject as compatible with liberal political theory: educational institutions that “instantiate radically diverse visions of truth and goodness” and that “reflect[] and reinforce[] our beliefs about the world and our sense of belonging.”

Why do I totally reject the idea that a liberal state should welcome a diverse range of schools that separately and mutually exclusively reinforce different families’ radically different beliefs and values about the world? It is *not* because, as Wenneborg contends, liberal theorists like Eamonn Callan and I start out with an “attitude . . . of suspicion” toward such institutions, presuming them guilty and forcing them to prove their innocence rather than more charitably giving a wide array of schooling practices the benefit of the doubt. This misunderstands the intellectual history of liberal political theory and philosophy of education in the 1990s (when Callan and I were writing about these issues, along with other liberal theorists such as Rob Reich, Harry Brighouse, Matthew Clayton, John and Patricia White, and many others). Rather, the prevailing liberal assumption was that citizens should be able to choose among a diverse array of options. In the case of education this was taken to mean, following John Stuart Mill, that parents should have freedom of choice among a diverse array of schools:

All that has been said of the importance of individuality of character, and diversity in opinions and modes of conduct, involves, as of the same unspeakable importance, diversity of education. A general State education is a mere contrivance

for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the dominant power in the government . . . in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind. . . . An education established and controlled by the State, should only exist, if it exist at all, as one among many competing experiments.³

It was this quite deep, century-plus-long belief that freedom to make educational choices was appropriately allocated to parents that Callan and I (and others) were questioning in the 1990s, as we asked what forms and allocations of educational choice were most protective of *children* in a liberal state. In other words, our starting point was not liberal suspicion of structural pluralism in education but rather a liberal embrace of it.

Second, and more importantly, our disagreement about the appropriate range of school diversity is not one based on “attitude” but rather one based on *argument*. *The Demands of Liberal Education* is an extended argument about the educational implications of taking liberal political theory seriously (and, *vice versa*, the implications for liberal political theory of taking education seriously). At its heart, it is an argument about the aims of education and demands of justice when we take children seriously as rights-holding beings in formation. This is where I think the crux of the disagreement arises between Wenneborg and me: I am focused on what justice *demand*s, and Wenneborg seems more focused on what justice permits, or maybe *desires*.

I say this because Wenneborg and I actually agree on some of the core aims of education. She claims, for instance, that “we need opportunities to develop the dispositions toward loving our neighbors with whom we differ that enable us to seek out and settle upon just and kind principles for pluralism in the first place.” I entirely agree. I further agree that “We need intentionally crafted opportunities to learn about different religions, worldviews, and cultures, to process and reflect on these differences and our own relationship with them, and to consider the principles by which we ought to live in the midst of deep pluralism and interact with those who are different from us.” The difference

between Wenneborg and me, then, is that I argue that the state must *guarantee* that *all* children attend schools that embrace these core educational aims, whereas Wenneborg seems to be satisfied if those aims *happen to be* achieved by *some* educational settings. I frankly do not understand this latter stance. If children “need” these educational opportunities for civic and autonomy-promoting education, then the state should ensure that children have guaranteed access to that learning. That is the point of state regulation. And, in fact, the array of schools I argue for in *The Demands of Liberal Education* are designed to support exactly the sort of reflection, autonomy development, and democratic civic development that Wenneborg calls for. A system that allows essentially unregulated private and home schooling, however, in which children may encounter no viewpoints or ways of life other than that embraced by their family and fellow believers, does not. Hence, I conclude, Wenneborg should embrace my arguments in *Demands* for a pluralistic array of detached schools, rather than my embracing her arguments in “Can We Cool It” for much more radical structural pluralism.

REFERENCES

1 Emily Wenneborg, “Can We Cool It about Schools? A Modest Case for Structural Pluralism in Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 3 (same issue). <https://doi.org/10.47925/79.3.016>

2 Since Wenneborg suggests in her paper that I do *not* favor such institutional diversity, I will quote a bit of *The Demands of Liberal Education* to clarify the record: “Schools which specialize along academic, artistic, or vocational lines should be encouraged, as should schools which diversify along administrative or pedagogic lines. Depending on their needs, interests, and learning styles, children should have the opportunity to choose between large or small schools, traditional and open classrooms, progressive and traditional teaching styles, and so forth, in addition to selecting schools with academic or vocational specializations. A good school for one child is not a good school for every child. As a result, children and parents should be able to choose among a diverse range of schools—so long as the requirements that schools be common and take children’s development of autonomy as their aim are not

compromised.” (Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 145). I further argue elsewhere that many religiously affiliated schools may be more likely to promote pluralistic dispositions (in Wenneborg’s terms) than many secular schools because they attract a more racially, ethnically, economically, and even ideologically and religiously diverse student body than their secular counterparts. See Meira Levinson and Sanford Levinson, “‘Getting Religion’: Religion, Community, and Diversity in Public and Private Schools,” in *School Choice: The Moral Debate*, ed. Alan Wolfe (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 104-125.

3 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; repr. London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 2011), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34901/34901-h/34901-h.htm>, 201-202.