

Is Comprehensive Liberal Social Justice Education Brainwashing?

Nicolas Tanchuk

Iowa State University

Tomas Rocha

University of Washington

Marc Krus

, *University of Winnipeg*

In both the United States and Canada conservative critics have charged that Social Justice Education (SJE) represents an “abuse of power” that results in “brainwashing” students.¹ To avoid succumbing to these charges, philosopher of education Lauren Bialystok argues that the political views taught in SJE, at least in Canada, must meet five conditions. Each condition supports a form of “comprehensive liberalism” (CL) that she takes to be both reflected in Canadian law and to be the morally correct basis upon which to adjudicate the content of public schooling in Canada. In this essay, we argue for a negative thesis: that Bialystok’s arguments, while mounting a compelling defense of SJE on the grounds of CL, do not establish that the content of SJE in Canada or elsewhere must be justified on the basis of CL or the five conditions. Through this ground-clearing work, we seek to carve out space for a future justification of SJE rooted in the autonomous epistemic, ethical, and political value of promoting learning.

In section one, we trace Bialystok’s CL account of the ends of SJE. In section two, we assume for the sake of argument that CL is the true end of politics and education. Under that assumption, we disambiguate the scope of Bialystok’s account. We then argue that on the most plausible disambiguation the five criteria Bialystok identifies

depend not only on the justification of CL as the proper end of politics, but also on an absent justification for imposing the proper end of politics on education. In section two, we drop the assumption that CL is true and argue that the burden of normatively justifying CL against dissent about the ends of politics is not met by leading CL theorists. Such justification, we claim, is nevertheless critical in responding to parental dissent, which may not accept the terms of the dominant present political culture. We conclude that an adequate justification of SJE would need to meet (at least) the two challenges that we raise.

BIALYSTOK'S CL THEORY OF SJE

SJE is a concept that, as Bialystok argues, is difficult to find unobjectionable. “No one proudly opposes ‘social justice,’” Bialystok claims, “[the] battle is only in the definition: everyone wants to claim it for their own.”²² Setting aside the question of whether one *must* endorse some conception of the just society, conservative critics have found much that, at least to them, is alarming within the web of practices standardly described as instances of SJE. In the United States, President Trump’s recent executive orders, speeches, and social media missives have targeted the work of social justice educators, in one case asserting it is nothing less than “child abuse.”²³ Conservative critics in Canada have charged that SJE is a form of ideological “brainwashing” that represents “an abuse of power.”²⁴ For these state officials and many they represent, SJE’s current practice is not the benevolent force it is widely perceived to be in faculties of education. It is perceived instead to be a form of indoctrination into what are, at best, a controversial set of political commitments that parents might (and often do) rightly reject. At worst, the political values foregrounded in SJE are perceived to be a set of misleading falsehoods about how people ought to think and live together in society. To respond to these real

political challenges, Bialystok rightly claims that a justification is owed which shows that the considerable power wielded by state education systems is not being misused when teachers engage in SJE.

Bialystok's nuanced argument seeks to fill this void. First, she seeks to empower SJE teachers by providing arguments sufficient "to respond to allegations of brainwashing" that are rightly regarded as unfounded. Second, Bialystok seeks "to reinforce objections to actual instances of inappropriate education or indoctrination" under the auspices of SJE.⁵ Bialystok's second task, in our view, is as important as the first. For everyone can imagine *some* form of political education under the purport of "justice" that would be damaging and harmful and that should be opposed. To meet both goals, Bialystok argues, SJE at least in Canada, must be grounded in a form of CL that is now present in Canadian positive law.

Bialystok claims that educators cannot avoid nor should they avoid teaching substantive political views. The political views that they teach both generally and as a part of SJE, however, must, according to Bialystok, meet five criteria:

1. have legislative backing in the form of such precedents as the *Charter*, human rights codes, and current policy;
2. be compatible with reasonable pluralism;
3. not engage in partisan politics or political activism that students do not choose;
4. be connected with developing skills for democratic engagement; and
5. respect students' freedom to abstain from activities that

contravene their own (emerging or tentative) comprehensive doctrines.⁶

These five conditions reflect CL political values that although not endorsed by all citizens are rightly seen as necessary sources of justification for teachers' work in schools in Canada's liberal democracy. Bialystok allows that these conditions may not be sufficient, due to the complexity of the issues in SJE, but holds that they are at least necessary for justifying the teaching of political views.⁷

To arrive at this conclusion, Bialystok starts by rejecting the possibility of providing a purely political conception of justice that is neutral in aim between reasonable and competing comprehensive ethical doctrines. Here, Bialystok departs from both the early and late John Rawls, but follows many, perhaps the majority, of leading philosophers of education.⁸ As Bialystok reports, Rawls thought it illiberal to forge justice upon any comprehensive conception of the good life but struggled to articulate how his purportedly neutralist account could avoid relying upon such a conception.⁹ The difficulties Rawls's account faces are especially acute in the domain of civic education, where the state seems quite unavoidably involved in character formation and where liberal character is but one option.¹⁰ Given Rawls's inability to find a neutral basis for his theory of justice, one might draw the conclusion that *liberalism* is incoherent, failing some other free-standing neutralist account of justice. Most philosophers of education, like Bialystok, have instead followed political philosopher Joseph Raz in claiming instead that liberalism remains the morally correct basis of our institutions, but is itself an at least partly comprehensive and partly perfectionist moral doctrine.¹¹

For those, like Bialystok, who accept CL, liberal values—how-

ever specified—must take moral priority *over* everyone's other commitments, shaping and regulating them across the public and private spheres in any case of conflict.¹² No moral doctrine inconsistent with liberalism, CL theorists hold, therefore, can be true.¹³ But many conflicting and more comprehensive moral doctrines can be consistent with liberalism so construed. On standard treatments of CL, what all such comprehensive doctrines must share is a fundamental respect for individual autonomy, which it is claimed, forms a necessary part of a good life in modern pluralistic societies.¹⁴ Autonomy, though not defined by Bialystok, is standardly understood, following Rawls, as the individual freedom to “form, revise, and rationally pursue a conception of the good.”¹⁵ On such accounts, respect for “reasonable” pluralism about the ultimate ends of life is presupposed by the respect for liberal autonomy, as a condition of its exercise.¹⁶ For to meaningfully develop and exercise autonomy, construed as the ability to choose between conceptions of the good life, one must be aware of, able to deliberate upon, and *actually live* alternative pictures of the good. For the CL theorist, any person who fails to respect individual autonomy and who rejects the demand to tolerate the existence of many incommensurable views of the ultimate good is at odds with this picture and is in some sense *worse than* a person who affirms its core values.

Four of Bialystok's conditions above, (2-5) derive directly from CL's commitment to autonomy and pluralism about the good life. Condition (2), *respect for reasonable pluralism* affirms a respect for a plurality of conceptions of ultimate ends, which, as noted, CL takes to be a part of adequately respecting individual autonomy. Condition (3), that political teaching must *not engage in partisan politics or political activism that students do not choose* is simply to respect students' autonomy, where such autonomy is understood as the ability to form, revise, and rationally pursue one's projects by choosing between incommensurable ultimate

ends. According to Bialystok:

there is a critical difference between teaching students to think about the world in such a way that may motivate independent political involvement, and requiring students to defend or oppose particular parties or polices. . . . signing students up for rallies or marching them down to City Hall inhibits students from forming their own conclusions autonomously.¹⁷

At the same time, in Bialystok's picture, teachers can and should teach students to respect CL and individual autonomy, even *if* they reject that value. On comprehensively liberal SJE, students should learn to respect and tolerate others' choice—for example, to live an LGBTQ* life or to have an abortion—and bracket any perceived moral obligations that conflict. Thus, on the basis of (2), Bialystok argues that:

The view that abortion is evil is inherently unaccepting of the view that it is a personal choice, but not vice versa. It is therefore defensible to teach that abortion is a personal choice while acknowledging that some individuals and institutions condemn it, yet indefensible to teach, for example, the Catholic catechism as incontestable fact.¹⁸

In teaching the former but not the latter values, teachers educate students to contribute to an autonomy-respecting culture reflecting CL in the values they affirm and reject.

Condition (4), *be connected with developing skills for democratic engagement*, according to Bialystok, elaborates on (3) by allowing that “com-

prehensive doctrines may be taught or endorsed,” but insists that “they should be accompanied by the development of age-appropriate skills such as critical thinking, logic, and media literacy, that will help prevent any doctrines from becoming dogma and ensure lifelong reflection about substantive views.”¹⁹ Students, here, are required to reflect cognitively on their options and the information that they use to guide their pursuit of chosen ends.

Condition (5), *respect students’ freedom to abstain from activities that contravene their own (emerging or tentative) comprehensive doctrines*, like (3), insists on respect for students’ individual autonomy by requiring teachers to respect “substantive commitments” that students arrive with when they come to class. According to Bialystok, “we now accept it is profoundly objectionable to force a student to pray in school or to pledge allegiance to something she rejects. Likewise it is illiberal to force students to participate in social justice activities that they find repugnant, even if the activities are otherwise justified.”²⁰ Bialystok asserts that students should be “exposed” to such activities, consistent with the conditions necessary for developing autonomous choice between conceptions of the good, but “entitled to hold their own opinions.”²¹ Bialystok’s first principle, *have legislative backing in the form of such precedents as the Charter, human rights codes, and current policy*, as we read it, is not a constituent of CL but is an expression of it in Canada. If, as Bialystok argues, CL is instantiated in Canadian legal practice, then to follow *Canadian* laws, at least in broad strokes, is to adhere to CL practices and the legitimately produced rules of a CL society.

DO THE MORAL PURPOSES OF SJE FOLLOW FROM CL?

It is unclear whether the five conditions in Bialystok’s account are intended to apply only to present Canadian society or to Canadian society *at any point in time*. If the latter, then difficulties arise. Even if

we suppose that CL is true, consider the many instances in Canadian history wherein the core commitments of CL were not yet instantiated in law. Prior to the *Persons* case, for example, white women settlers were denied the vote. Canadian law, as it was interpreted prior to that point, nowhere contained the idea that white women were persons, to say nothing of Indigenous women. If we assume CL is morally true and CL entails respecting all women as politically autonomous equals in society, then surely a social justice educator prior to the *Persons* case would have a general moral and political obligation to bring about women's suffrage. To deny this is to reject CL's respect for individual autonomy.

If CL rightly regulates the normative content of *education*, as CL theorists like Bialystok claim, then how could an SJ educator deny that she has a normative moral obligation to *educate* her students to recognize the value of all women's autonomy and the arguments in favor of their right to vote? Under CL's moral values, a teacher would seem called to subject any view that rejects women's basic rights to robust criticism, wherever practically possible, and to advance CL's truth. There may be pragmatic constraints on an educator's ability to realize this moral goal—perhaps the threats of patriarchal, racist, or colonial men in society would make it dangerous to teach CL's truths—but that would not make it *morally* unjustified as an aim. A teacher who taught against this form of sexism at this point in history would not, however, by hypothesis, be backed by any law. So (1) would seem to be unnecessary for morally justified CL SJE, at least in some cases.

Bialystok's defender might object that our counterexample does not undermine her account because one could teach from the law's commitment to the autonomy of white male settlers and argue for an extension of this respect to women. Of course, we think this is

possible. But we think it is not possible at the time of the case without conceptual innovation that challenges and rejects the explicit restriction of this respect in law *only* to male settlers. A dilemma arises here: On one hand, if any legal *ideal*—for example, the goal of promoting wellbeing or natural justice could be reinterpreted and extended in *any way*—then condition (1) is no restriction on SJE at all. For *any* political view will derive from some view of wellbeing and justice. Alternatively, if condition (1) has teeth and restricts teachers to the *present leading interpretations* of the positive law, then the innovation above is precluded prior to the *Persons* case in SJE but morally desirable.

Perhaps, all five conditions apply only to *present* Canadian society, where CL, as Bialystok claims, has been well established in legal practice, even if not throughout all of society (p. 426). Let us suppose for the sake of argument that it is true that CL is well instantiated in Canadian law. If that's right, then because the bulk of Canadian law and legal principles reflect CL, then, one might think with Bialystok, that Canadian law imposes what are largely legitimate and justifiable constraints on SJE. If one cannot find at least some legal basis for the content one wants to teach to students, then, as Bialystok argues, one is engaged in an illegitimate practice: "brainwashing," as conservative critics charge.²² This makes the justification of (1) contingent upon the justification of CL as the end of education but now seems redundant: CL does the justificatory work, not the law.

A second objection can be brought against using CL to regulate SJE, even while assuming CL is the proper end of politics. Not *only* must CL be the proper end of *politics* to regulate SJE, but there must also be justification for imposing CL as the proper end of politics on education as *education's* proper end. For all that's been shown, it's possible that even if CL is the proper end of politics, as Bialystok

claims, that education has its own ultimate purpose independent of the purpose of politics. One possibility is that there is an institutional division of labor in the pursuit of a value-pluralist account of the good life. Perhaps medicine's telos is health, education's telos is promoting learning,²³ and the telos of politics and law is promoting autonomy and reasonable pluralism. Within such a picture, CL values might sometimes rightly defer to health promotion in medicine, for example, in cases where respect for individual autonomy conflicts with ensuring basic public health. Analogously, individual autonomy might sometimes take a backseat to promoting learning in educational institutions. This is not to deny that CL values still might play a role in civic education but may be overridden, for example, by compulsory attendance laws, to ensure all acquire a threshold of academic knowledge and skill that is valuable in its own right. Education and health might defer to CL values in politics, law, and other spheres of civil society. Politics may provide many of the services that create schools, but it does not follow from that fact that the purposes of politics rightly subsume those of education. The opposite may even be true: politics might *serve* education. A further argument is needed to bridge the gap between the true account of the ends of politics and the true ends of K-12 schooling in specific.

IS CL THE END OF POLITICS?

Even if it could be shown that CL, *if* true, should regulate education, it is a further question whether CL is true. Is Canadian liberalism and its CL underpinnings the end of history? We are not yet convinced. If respect for individual autonomy to choose between systems of ultimate ends is to regulate all spheres of social and political life, as the CL theorist claims, then this priority must be justified over any competing conception of the good life that rejects this value.

Otherwise, it's unclear why it is *normative* at all. If CL's commitment to autonomy is not justified over alternatives, then it is better *described* as a prejudice of CL thinkers, one which is morally optional for others to endorse.

Bialystok, in our view, provides an excellent account of the dialectic between neutralist liberals, who sought to avoid perfectionist commitments to any conception of the good life, and perfectionist communitarians like Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, who argue that it is impossible to reason about justice without relying on perfectionist values.²⁴ Philosophers of education, as Bialystok observes, have been at the forefront of those who have recognized that to select a curriculum of study, to determine pedagogical methods, and to develop assessments, one must first have some conception, whether implicit or explicit, of the sort of person one is trying to form. All such conceptions, moreover, are subject to normative ethical and political controversy.

Despite this insight, and perhaps surprisingly, liberal perfectionist philosophers of education have not offered any robust defense of the priority of autonomy and an autonomy-respecting pluralism over competing illiberal conceptions of the good life. Dissent from SJE, however, need not stop at the boundaries of legally dominant political traditions, for as nearly all philosophers recognize, dominant political traditions can and sometimes should change in response to dissent. As noted above, one can imagine a feminist parent or teacher prior to the *Persons* case dissenting from dominant moral traditions codified in educational law and doing so *rightly*.

Bialystok acknowledges that CL values may be similarly challenged by dissenters. She cites Sandel who points out that whether one, for example, takes respect for individual autonomy to be suffi-

cient to ground the right to an abortion, depends upon how one sees the moral priority of individual autonomy over one's other perceived obligations such as those articulated in one's religion. If one rejects CL and the priority of autonomy, then one may not be convinced that any form of SJE that teaches one has a moral right to choose to have an abortion or one's sexual identity is morally and pedagogically correct. This is to say nothing of those who might think that CL in Canada is a colonial doctrine that wrongly displaces Indigenous philosophical traditions of ethics and law.²⁵ We support many of the practices CL theorists seek to defend but think a justification is needed to respond to dissenting parents who may think otherwise.

Bialystok does not cite any ultimate grounding for the commitment to CL. But we take this to be no limitation of her work in specific. To our knowledge, one does not exist in the literature. Meira Levinson and Stephen Macedo start from the axioms of the liberal-democratic tradition in developing arguments for a partially comprehensive view of liberal democratic politics.²⁶ Joseph Raz only claims that it is hard to flourish in an autonomy-supporting society if one is not autonomous.²⁷ Like other CL theorists, Raz does not show *why* it would be best to *continue to reproduce* autonomy-valuing societies. Harry Brighouse & Adam Swift claim that respect for autonomy or its denial is the point of "bedrock disagreement" in their account of the responsibilities of parents, without showing that it is wrong to disagree at the level of bedrock.²⁸ Eammon Callan claims that liberalism does not need to show it makes life good, only that it does not make life bad.²⁹ But presumably, for dissenters, their view is that liberalism *does* make life bad or, at least, *worse* than it would otherwise be.³⁰ In the cases that matter in morally justifying SJE, the cases where CL is in question and people think CL would be *bad* to endorse, these accounts are silent.

Elsewhere, Harry Brighouse develops a Millian argument for teaching for autonomy based on individuals' unique constitutions. Brighouse asserts that there are some forms of life that are objectively "very good" but within which some will not be able to flourish. "A homosexual," Brighouse claims, "simply cannot live, from the inside, a way of life in which those who refrain from heterosexual marriage and childrearing are social outsiders."³¹ Autonomy skills are needed, Brighouse concludes, so such people can exit such ways of life into other good lives and flourish. But this is perplexing. For if it's true that homosexuality is permissible, is not the homophobic way of life objectively wrong about what flourishing requires *even* for the morally corrupt homophobe—not simply "for homosexuals"? One might think it's not the ability to choose a different but also "very good way of life" that is needed here, but the ability to discover that homophobia ought to be dismantled in *any* community for it is at odds with true flourishing. Intellectual skills are needed to discover and instrumental skills to move the community to a monist vision of flourishing—not the choice *between* plural but distinct accounts of ultimate ends.

On the left, CL also faces push-back from democratic socialist critical theory grounded in the autonomous value of learning. Rahel Jaeggi, for example, argues for a teleological conception of autonomy that, following Dewey, explicitly rejects pluralism about the ultimate end of human conduct.³² For Jaeggi, but not the Berlin-Rawls tradition, valuing autonomy is not synonymous with valuing practical choice between incommensurable ultimate ends. Instead, for Jaeggi, following Dewey and Hegel, positive freedom is forged through the growth of capacities to learn and solve problems *as our provisional but singular ultimate end*.³³ In this competing, progressive tradition, the telos of promoting learning in community is a monist critical ethical goal that conflicts with liberal pluralism about ultimate ends.

To promote learning and problem-solving in community, if the empirical evidence is sufficiently clear, a teacher in the Deweyan tradition might have a duty to reject respect for some forms of religious pluralism which liberalism would hold to be reasonable. For example, on this alternative learning-ethic picture, if homophobia undermines LGBTQ* people's ability to participate in community *as a learner and problem-solver*, then there is no free-standing respect owed to religious doctrines that are homophobic, even if they are "reasonable" in liberal terms. Furthermore, if diversity of life experience enriches a learning environment, teachers might rightly seek to not only expose students to the possibility of living LGBTQ* lives and ask that they be tolerated by dissenters but also seek to have students *actually affirm* such lives and lead a critical assessment of beliefs blocking such affirmation *as groundless*. Teaching students to affirm LGBTQ* lives as valuable contrary to (say) their homophobic religious beliefs, would violate condition (5) above and some interpretations of (2), but would do so justifiably for Deweyan progressive accounts of ethics and politics. This more robust equity-focused picture of SJE teaches for a different conception of ethical truth and seeks to actively dismantle oppressive forms of pluralism that CL would otherwise shield. These commitments, we think, may resonate with the sensibilities of at least some critically-minded social justice educators.

We do not here intend to show that any of these alternative views are warranted. We aim only to point out that there is a real moral and political question at stake between proponents of CL SJE and other conceptions of the justification of the political content of education. If CL SJE is not to be assumed dogmatically, then more work needs to be done. Otherwise, CL SJE violates condition (4) by treating its own values as beyond the need for normative justification, qualifying on its own terms as a case of "brainwashing."

1 Lauren Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing': A Defense of Social Justice Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (2014): 414.

2 Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing,'" 417. Bialystok rejects emotivism in a footnote and an error-theoretic critique of SJE without argument. We note this in part to note a tendency in liberal political theory to treat its own axioms as starting points.

3 Nick Niedzwiadek, "Trump Goes After Black Lives Matter, 'Toxic Propaganda' in Schools," *Politico*, Sep 17, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/17/trump-black-lives-matter-1619-project-417162>.

4 Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing,'" 414.

5 Bialystok, 415.

6 Bialystok, 430-1.

7 Bialystok, 415.

8 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship Virtue & Community in Liberal Constitutionalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

9 Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing,'" 421.

10 Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 38-39.

11 Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986)

12 Macedo, *Liberal Virtues*, 258.

13 Macedo, 264.

- 14 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, Isaiah Berlin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958/2002), 167-217; Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 391; Macedo, *Liberal Virtues*, 264; Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education*, 117; Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 38-39.
- 15 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 30.
- 16 Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education*, 36-63.
- 17 Bialystok, "Politics of 'Brainwashing,'" 430.
- 18 Bialystok, 430.
- 19 Bialystok, 430.
- 20 Bialystok, 431.
- 21 Bialystok, 431.
- 22 Bialystok, 414.
- 23 Jonas Soltis, "The Virtues of Teaching" *Journal of Thought*, 22, no. 3 (1987): 61-67.
- 24 Bialystok, "Politics of 'Brainwashing,'" 420.
- 25 Marc Kruse, Nicolas Tanchuk, and Robert Hamilton, "Educating in the Seventh Fire" *Educational Theory* 69, no. 5 (2019): 587-601.
- 26 Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education*, 7, 23; Macedo, *Liberal Virtues*, 1-10.
- 27 Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 391-395.
- 28 Harry Brighouse & Adam Swift, *Family Values* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 153.
- 29 Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 67.
- 30 Margaret Moore, "Liberalism and the Idea of the Good Life," *The Review of Politics* 53, no. 4 (1991): 672-690.
- 31 Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 17.
- 32 Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- 33 Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms*, 296.