Can We Cool It About Schools? A Modest Case for Structural Pluralism in Education

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We place enormous burdens on public schools. Not only do we want them to be safe and fun places for young people to spend a large portion of their time, but they are also one of the biggest arenas in which we duke out our cultural disagreements regarding science, human nature, patriotism, and so much more. Many philosophers of education, myself included, like to think of schools as training grounds for living with pluralism: by bringing together students from widely different backgrounds and value systems, public schools can inculcate dispositions of tolerance and inclusion and provide practice in the skills needed to live together in the midst of deep differences.[1] The reality, however, is that American public schools are as often the *objects* of (failed) attempts at living together, as they are the *agents* of learning to live in the midst of pluralism. The result is that, rather than fostering a thriving pluralism of ways to do school, various parties strive together for control over a single, monolithic approach to schooling.

Of course, not everyone pursues this quest: some families and communities simply opt out of the battle over schools, choosing instead to focus their energy on educating their own children as they desire in private schools or at home. While this might seem to ease the burdens on public schools, by reducing both the number of children they must educate and the number of educational visions they must accommodate, it creates a new problem. Children who are educated in contexts other than public schools do not have access to the beneficial training in living well with others that public schools (we hope) provide. So the very educational philosophers who care most about education for living in the midst of pluralism are often the least open to pluralism of educational choices. Education for pluralism, then, becomes yet another way that all schools must be the same.

What if the pressure we put on schooling is, in fact, part of the prob-

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lem? Could it be that schools have become such heated cultural battlegrounds precisely because we have forgotten that they are just one among many important sites of learning and encounter with difference? In this paper I make a case for two kinds of structural pluralism in education: pluralism of educational *institutions* and pluralism of educational *contexts*.[2] In the first section, I encourage philosophers of education to adopt an attitude of welcome, rather than one of suspicion and distrust, toward diverse educational institutions (such as private religious schools and homeschooling). Such a welcoming attitude can be difficult to achieve, however, if we expect schools to carry the full burden of passing on our most dearly held beliefs and values to the next generation. For this reason, in the second section I remind us all that education properly understood must not be limited to formal schooling, but occurs in other settings, too: families, neighborhoods, religious communities, and more. By keeping in mind the educational significance of these other contexts, perhaps we can cool the temperature on our discussions of *schools*.

IN FAVOR OF PLURALISM IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

A sphere of life may be said to have structural pluralism of institutions when different institutions of the same type co-exist in the same sphere. Sometimes, these different institutions remain fairly similar to one another; for instance, in the financial sphere, there is no single entity that controls every bank, but the distinctives of any given bank are not terribly significant. In other cases, institutional pluralism connects to much deeper differences regarding what we believe to be true and right, our vision of the good life, our understanding of who we are and the story of which we are a part. For example, the news media has received a lot of attention in recent years because of the ways our choice of news outlet both reflects and reinforces our beliefs about the world and our sense of belonging. Despite all the problems that have been identified with the role of news media in increasing polarization, the ability to make meaningful choices about where we get our news remains an important way that our society allows us to pursue different ways of living.

The question I raise in this section is whether educational institutions should be permitted the kind of pluralism we see in the news media. That is,

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should there be schooling options available that not only offer slight variations within the same basic educational framework but that actually embody fundamentally distinctive educational aims and approaches? Some examples of such potential differences would include schools that are based on educational philosophies, such as Waldorf or Montessori schools; schools that are rooted in intellectual or religious traditions, such as classical schools or Muslim schools; and schools that seek to cultivate in students a definite set of beliefs, values, and practices, such as a commitment to social justice or environmental causes. Moreover, any of these differences might be found either in a school setting or in a homeschooling context. A society with robust pluralism of educational institutions would promote the flourishing of all these educational options and more.[3]

The views of philosophers of education regarding pluralism of educational institutions range from total state control (the most restrictive) to state oversight (the most permissive). Educational philosophers who advocate total state control argue that complete control of a child's formal schooling should be in the hands of the state in order to ensure that children develop the autonomy required of citizens, even against their parents' wishes.[4] Meira Levinson, for example, argues that no family, even one that highly values autonomy, can achieve an environment that meets all the requirements for developing autonomy; therefore, the liberal state is justified in imposing liberal schooling on all children.[5] There is a kind of structural pluralism at work here: Levinson respects pluralism of educational *contexts*, by acknowledging that families and schools each have different roles in educating young people. (I take up the matter of contextual pluralism for education in the next section.) Even so, she insists that one of those contexts—namely, schooling—should be wholly under the control of the liberal state, thereby refusing to allow any room for pluralism of different kinds of schools. Levinson recognizes that such state-controlled liberal education might look like an instance of state tyranny but argues that it is actually a way of counteracting the power of *parental* tyranny.[6] In addition, she grants that state-controlled liberal schools can take various forms and specializations, so long as these variations do not

espouse fundamental conceptions of the good or become socially divisive (as is the case, according to Levinson, with religious schools in the United States and more recently in Great Britain).[7] In fact, given the regulations necessary to ensure an education for autonomy, she argues, "there would in practice be little if anything to distinguish private schools from state schools—which is exactly the way it should be."[8] So Levinson's position of "total state control" is not wholly opposed to institutional pluralism in education, but it *is* closed to a pluralism that permits schools to embody differing beliefs, values, or conceptions of the good.

Other philosophers of education come much closer to permitting schools to instantiate radically diverse visions of truth and goodness, provided such plural schooling either submits to the oversight of the liberal state or takes place only in the early years, eventually giving way to common schooling. In either case, the state continues to set the terms of educational institutional pluralism: it establishes the ground on which non-state educational institutions are permitted to exist and maintains the boundaries of what these plural educational options are allowed to do. Thus, whether through imposing mechanisms of oversight or through requiring eventual common schooling, the stance here is one of watchfulness and caution toward plural educational institutions: these philosophers fundamentally distrust non-state schools, and while they may grant them limited space for a season, they are always on the lookout for the misstep or overreach that will justify shutting them down.

Eamonn Callan, for example, explains that non-public schooling options exist along a continuum, from those whose goals closely match those of state-run schools to those that are not merely different from state schools but actually antithetical to the goals of state schools. For this reason, those who would argue for pluralism of educational institutions face what Callan explicitly labels a "dilemma."[9] Either their educational goals approximate those of state-run schools, and so non-public schools are unnecessary. Or their educational goals oppose those of state-run schools (in Callan's view, autonomy and non-oppression), and so permitting non-public schools would be inappropriate.[10] Notice that Callan does not imagine the possibility of educational goals that diverge

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from the goals of the state and yet do not oppose them or harm students. Thus, Callan concludes, "So whether the public educational ends that parents pursue cohere with the public culture of a pluralistic society or diverge sharply from its values, the case for a parental right to state-sponsored separate schooling looks pretty weak."[11] Though Callan's primary concern in this instance is the question of using state funds to support schools that are not state-controlled, the dilemma he identifies reveals an attitude of watchfulness, even suspicion, toward plural educational institutions.

But this is not the only attitude we might take toward institutional pluralism in education. We may not want to go as far as educational historians James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt in claiming that "the public school is the functional equivalent of an established church."[12] Nevertheless, we can cultivate a view of educational institutional pluralism as a core part of the pluralism we desire in society, as a positive good to be nourished and preserved, not begrudgingly admitted and carefully watched for potential threats. The core difference here is not so much regarding specific policies—much less funding choices—but rather with attitudes. On the one hand, we can choose to see non-state educational institutions as potentially threatening to educational goals such as autonomy or respect for diversity and so tolerate them only up to the point where this threat is realized.[13] On the other hand, we can begin with a basic assumption that a plurality of educational institutions is itself good and so direct our reluctance, not toward permitting educational institutional pluralism, but rather toward requiring state oversight and control at all.

At the same time, a strong predisposition in favor of institutional pluralism in education does not necessitate a blanket acceptance of all kinds of educational institutions, without regard for whether they are harmful to students—or, for that matter, even educational at all. In seeking to restrain the control of the state over schooling, we may risk inadvertently undermining the educational opportunities of our most vulnerable neighbors, who may have no other avenues to an education other than that provided by the state. For example, the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE) has raised significant concerns about the potential for lax homeschooling regulations to shield edu-

cational neglect and child abuse. Yet CRHE, comprised mainly of people who were themselves homeschooled, advocates for state policies that "recognize homeschooling's flexibility and potential for innovation" and "reflect what most responsible homeschooling parents already do."[14] CRHE's position shows that it is possible to adopt a stance of welcome and encouragement toward diverse forms of schooling without neglecting to care for and protect the vulnerable.

Nevertheless, pluralism of educational institutions is not the only way to achieve pluralism of educational structures. This is because so much of education occurs outside of formal schooling entirely. It is to this pluralism of educational contexts that I now turn.

IN FAVOR OF PLURALISM IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

So far, I have been inviting philosophers of education to consider adopting an attitude of welcome, rather than suspicion, toward non-public educational institutions, including religious schools and homeschooling. Yet structural educational pluralism has another side: it involves recognizing and encouraging not only a diversity of *schools*, including schools that are not run by the state and schools rooted in various religious traditions, but also a diversity of *contexts* for education, beyond schools themselves. Different structures in society pursue different ends in different ways: schools are not businesses, churches are not governments, businesses are not families, and so on. Therefore, we should neither expect one kind of structure or context to look exactly like another nor require it to operate according to the rules of a structure that it is not.

Moreover, each of these different types of contexts results in a different kind of education. In fact, we must recognize that education *does* occur in a wide variety of organizations, institutions, communities, and contexts, not only in those that explicitly bear the label "educational." In some ways, this is well-trodden ground for philosophers of education, for whom the adage "education is more than schooling" has long been a first principle. Half a century ago, Ivan Illich called for the "deschooling" of society. He pointed out that, far from being essential for learning, schools as institutions got in the way of real

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learning by funneling students along predetermined paths—and, of course, abandoning to their fate any who did not fit the mold. Illich urged us instead to develop learning webs, highly decentralized and widely accessible, that learners could navigate as they chose.[15] More recently, Nicholas C. Burbules considers Illich's hope for learning webs to be realized to some extent in the "ubiquitous learning" made possible by digital devices and hyperconnectivity.[16]

However, the literature on ubiquitous learning focuses primarily on the acquisition of information. There is still room for philosophers of education to take more seriously the ubiquity of education not merely as the gathering of knowledge and skills but as formation into certain kinds of people. In addition to providing ready access to facts and practical instructions, digital devices and their ubiquity also shape our values, habits, and dispositions in all sorts of formative and malformative ways. In fact, if we fully understand education as *formation*, then its ubiquity becomes even more apparent.

This is true not only in general but also particularly in terms of education for living in the midst of pluralism. Just as pluralism itself is not limited to the sphere of government, so too education for pluralism is not limited to the institutional school. Families, churches, neighborhoods, and clubs all exhibit various kinds of pluralism, and they all offer an education of their own, training us to live well or poorly in the midst of pluralism. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that the informal, implicit education received outside of schools counts at least as strongly in determining one's values and dispositions as the formal, explicit instruction delivered *in* school. It is true that deliberate instruction makes a difference in how we think and behave regarding pluralism. 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. But, just as much, we need opportunities to practice actually living by those principles. Even more so, 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. When it comes to living

as a good citizen in a pluralistic society, neither ready access to facts nor merely holding the right beliefs about pluralism will suffice without the corresponding values and attitudes that enable one to follow through on those beliefs.

Of course, schools themselves also offer an implicit education in addition to their explicit curriculum. Indeed, the core purpose of Callan's and Levinson's projects is to develop an account of education (and especially schooling) that successfully forms students for citizenship in pluralistic liberal democracies. Yet they seem more concerned with the institutional organization and control of education for citizenship than with the specific nature of the education (both formal and informal) that students receive in state schools. Although they acknowledge that school organization alone is not sufficient for producing citizens of a pluralistic society, the institutional format of schooling receives greater focus than the informal formation. Thus, it begins to seem that state-run schools *inherently* provide an appropriate education for living with pluralism simply by virtue of being under the control of the state and open to all.

We may want to question Callan's and Levinson's assumption that the actual formation students receive in state-run schools, and not merely the formal organization of these institutions, serves to cultivate dispositions such as tolerance, patience, and humility that enable us to live well with those we disagree with.[17] But even if we accept this claim as it stands, we can still recognize that state-run schools do not possess a monopoly on the capacity to cultivate these dispositions. Recall Levinson's claim that even parents who highly value autonomy are *not sufficient* to foster their children's autonomy without help from state-run schools. What I propose here is a transposition of this idea: that even schools that highly value pluralism are *not necessary* to cultivate the dispositions of pluralism. While it would be a wonderful thing to have a system of schooling that offered a consistent and multifaceted formation for pluralism (while, ideally, making space for individual schools to draw from a wide variety of traditions and value systems), even in the *absence* of such a system, those of us who care about education for pluralism need not lose hope.

This focus on formation beyond schooling might seem to reinforce certain inequitable societal privileges—for instance, the privilege of having

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parents who possess discretionary time, energy, and income to invest in their children's education, who are sufficiently knowledgeable (about the world, about child development, about their own commitments) to do so effectively, and who care about their children enough to wish to do so at all. If shifting the focus and the burden of education away from schools and onto families, religious communities, and neighborhoods perpetuates existing disadvantages of race and class, that is undoubtedly cause for concern. But I do not believe this is necessarily so. On the contrary, marginalized communities, who have been harmed or neglected by American public schools, may be much more aware than White, middle-class Americans of both the potential of and the need for informal yet deeply meaningful formation, drawing on the resources not only of the nuclear family but also of grandmothers, aunts, Sunday school teachers, neighbors, and more.[18] Different families, communities, and extended social networks may vary greatly in their structure and even in their access to resources, yet they all possess great capabilities for both formation and malformation.

After all, if our experiences and influences both in and out of school can be formative, they can also be malformative. Furthermore, good formal schooling can enrich good out-of-school learning regarding pluralism, but even the best formal schooling cannot overcome outside experiences that misform young people's habits and attitudes toward pluralism. Of course, this means that the reverse is also true: even the worst formal schooling can only do so much to counteract positive out-of-school learning.

For this reason, greater attention to the ubiquity of education-as-formation, in contrast to a narrower understanding of education-as-schooling, also means that religious communities are set free from the need to insist on their right to educate their children at private religious schools or at home. This does not mean relinquishing this right entirely; as I have suggested above, a welcoming attitude toward a plurality of educational institutions is a core part of having a pluralistic society. But it might be wise and appropriate to cool down the fervor with which certain groups in America demand this right. Even if the ability to pursue alternatives to state-controlled schooling were to be removed entirely, religious communities would still be able to pursue a distinctive form

of education in the home and the church. Pluralism of educational contexts—a recognition of the learning that occurs in all areas of life—both relaxes the efforts of particular groups to use the state to implement their preferred approaches to education (whatever they may be) and gives each of us hope for passing on our most important values, regardless of who holds control over formal schooling.

In conclusion, I want to be clear that nothing I say here means we should stop being involved in our schools, seeking to make them good and just as each of us sees it. Schools, and policies regarding schools, are important! They are just not of *ultimate* importance. When we remember that opportunities for formation abound, both in and out of schools, perhaps the heated debates regarding control of schools can cool down a little, a little more space can open up for diverse institutions of education, and we can let genuine pluralism flourish just a little more.

REFERENCES

1 In addition to the books by Meira Levinson and Eamonn Callan discussed in greater depth below, the following works (among many others produced by philosophers of education) assume that a major goal of schooling is preparation for living together in the midst of pluralism: Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenry* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Lauren Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing': A Philosophical Defense of Social Justice Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2014): 413-440; Walter Feinberg and Richard A. Layton, *For the Civic Good: The Liberal Case for Teaching Religion in the Public Schools* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2014); Benjamin Justice and Colin MacLeod, *Have a Little Faith: Religion, Democracy, and the American Public School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

2 See Emily G. Wenneborg, "Making Sense of Pluralism: A Neo-Calvinist Approach," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 1 (2021): 131-144, https://doi.org/10.47925/77.1.131, which distinguishes structural pluralism of types of structures (for instance, families vs. businesses vs. schools) from pluralism of structures of particular types (for instance, different kinds of schools).

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3 In considering the permissibility of diverse educational institutions, the question of financial support for educational choice almost immediately arises. Though this matter is not my focus in this paper, it cannot be avoided entirely, so I briefly address it here. While I recognize the merit of legal scholar John Inazu's claim that "facilitating pluralism means funding pluralism" (John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016], 67), at the same time I am more concerned to foster a favorable attitude toward pluralism of educational institutions than to pursue state funding for non-public schooling. In the United States today, the vast majority of students are educated in schools that are both funded and controlled by the state. For this reason, any program of financial support for non-state schooling is necessarily understood on analogy with these state-run schools. In consequence, I worry that the regulations that everybody acknowledges must accompany any state funding would not be limited to ensuring basic educational competency but would extend to evaluating educational philosophies and ideological commitments as well. The result would be to undermine, rather than support, genuine pluralism in this area. We need to imagine new ways of doing school and even see these in action before we can trust them with our financial support. For further discussion and a thorough argument that educational (institutional) pluralism cannot be achieved without state funding, see Ashley Rodgers Berner, *No One Way to School: Pluralism and American Public Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

4 Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46-50. Throughout this paper, I take Levinson's (and Callan's) statements regarding state oversight of schooling at face value, without contextualizing them either in historical context or in later developments in their authors' thought. My thanks to Meira Levinson for helping me to see *The Demands of Liberal Education* as responding to pre-existing postures in the liberalism of the 1990s.

5 Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education,* 60-63.

6 Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education,* 66-69.

7 Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education,* 145, 147, 157-159.

8 Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education,* 145.

9 Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1997), 188. https://doi.org/10.1093/0198292589.001.0001

10 Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 188-189.

11 Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 189.

12 James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 4.

13 I say "*choose* to see" in order to draw attention to the role of basic assumptions in each of the positions outlined here. The Cardus Education Survey, conducted over more than a decade by Canadian thinktank Cardus, provides empirical evidence that contradicts this common assumption that non-public schooling undermines civic unity. For example, "private and religious school attendance exerts a long-term positive influence on civic measures and outcomes, with one component of adult civic engagement standing out in particular: giving and volunteering" (Ray Pennings and Marisa Casagrande, "Religious Schools: Seedbeds of Civic Virtue in the Culture War?" *Cardus*, April 4, 2019, https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/religious-schools-seedbeds-of-civic-virtue-in-the-culture-war/.

14 Coalition for Responsible Home Education, "Policy Recommendations," https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/advocacy/lawmakers/policy-recommendations/.

15 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyers Publishers Ltd, 1970). Illich is particularly interesting because, while religious in his own way, he (unlike many public-school critics today) is decidedly not Rightwing. For more on the substantial tradition of Leftist opposition to formal schooling, see Joel Spring, *A Primer of Libertarian Education* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975) and Milton Gaither, *Homeschool: An American History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 95-101 and 122-128.

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16 See, for example, Nicholas C. Burbules, "Meanings of Ubiquitous Learning," in *Ubiquitous Learning*, ed. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 15-20.

17 This list of dispositions or "aspirations" for living well in the midst of pluralism comes from Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*, Chapter 5.

18 Among many other potential sources of evidence, see historian Carl Kaestle's discussion of the original purposes of American public schools in relation to various populations and Lisa Puga's ethnographic findings regarding African American families' decision to homeschool their children in order to avoid the harms of participating in a racially biased formal school system. Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Lisa Puga, "'Homeschooling Is Our Protest': Educational Liberation for African American Homeschooling Families in Philadelphia, PA," *Peabody Journal of Education* 94, no. 3 (2019): 281-296, https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1617579. The gendered nature of both formal and informal education is another matter entirely and is outside the scope of this paper.