Why (and How) Schools Should Engage in Political Education

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Political education is a loaded expression, and even more so when it is suggested that state authorities should be in charge of it. To many people, it will evoke indoctrination or even re-education camps. It is true that authoritarian states wanting to secure the obedience of their citizens have a strong incentive to shape their political beliefs, and this is often what political education organized by public authorities has looked like in the past and may look like nowadays. This grounds a legitimate concern towards any form of politicization or partisan instrumentalization of the educational system. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that a form of publicly organized political education is also necessary in democratic contexts—and to understand what kind of political education is required.

Democracy is widely understood as the attempt by a political community to choose its own laws while respecting the equal standing of each citizen. This definition is wide enough to unite a plurality of more particular conceptions of democracy, from Rousseau to Castoriadis and Habermas for example (Rousseau 1762; Castoriadis 1987; Habermas 1996). This collective endeavor can succeed only if citizens understand what is at stake in the decisions they have to make, are sufficiently informed about the options available to them, and show respect and concern for their fellow citizens. These democratic competencies are not innate; they are acquired through a long and complex process of political education, the process by which people come to form judgments on parties, politicians, institutions and policies. Currently, this process mostly occurs within families and then through a diversity of informal interactions in the private and professional spheres of people's lives.

My main claim in this article is that, in contexts of sufficient political pluralism, political education[1] should more firmly be taken in charge by primary and secondary schools. In the first section, I explain why political education is an important and demanding collective good. In the second, why the spontaneous political education occurring within families and other spaces of socialization is unlikely to deliver appropriate political education. It may seem odd to compare schools and families with respect to some educational goals. Yet given that families play an important role in shaping the political judgments of children and that some parents see political education as their prerogative, the capacity of families to deliver this collective good is worth questioning. In the third section, I explain why the school environment—and classrooms in particular—have more potential for

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[1] People more often talk about *civic* or *democratic* education, probably because "political" education has a stronger ideological connotation and seems less compatible with the expectation of neutrality often associated with public education. I will nonetheless talk about *political* education in this article because I want to insist that what is required is not just the knowledge of institutions often associated with *civic* education, or the inculcation of democratic norms, but also a more substantive education to *political debates*, as will be specified below.

the development of considered political judgments. In the fourth, I deal with the main objection to such a project, which is grounded in the legitimate fear of political indoctrination. And in the fifth I give a broad idea of what a citizen-empowering political education aiming at a form of impartiality could look like, to deflate the fear of indoctrination.

1.   Why Political Education Matters

The two main components of the definition of democracy used in the introduction are political autonomy and political equality. Political autonomy refers to the ability of a political community to determine its own aims and the means appropriate to these aims. This is a challenge because although many citizens know what they want, and what kind of society they would want to live in, identifying the means to achieve such an end is epistemically much more demanding. It requires a basic understanding of social reality and of controversies about policy issues. If people aspire to prosperity, for example, they must know what kind of economic policies are the most likely to promote collective prosperity. If they care about justice, they must have an awareness of prevailing injustices, their causes, and the means of overcoming them. This already requires some basic knowledge of the social sciences that many young citizens lack when they reach voting age (and may not even acquire at a later stage). Fortunately, though, representative democracies rely on a division of political labor that relieves citizens from the need to become experts in all policy areas (Beerbohm 2012).

Citizens can entrust political parties or politicians whose goals they share to identify appropriate means of reaching these goals. This, however, does not entirely relieve citizens from the epistemic burden mentioned above, because the trick is that, in elections, they are often invited to make a choice between candidates or parties who proclaim the same values and general goals (who is against justice and prosperity?) but offer different paths to honor these values or to reach these goals. Hence, citizens must be able to assess the plausibility of these competing paths, which again requires some basic knowledge and understanding of policy debates. This is the *epistemic dimension of political education*.

The *moral dimension of political education* stems from the second component of democracy: political equality. As democratic theorists have long emphasized, democracy is not reducible to a procedure for selecting representatives and making collective decisions.[2] The democratic ideal also includes a more *substantive* dimension, related to the demand to treat citizens *equally*. Without this substantive requirement, democracy would hardly be distinguishable from majority tyranny (Dworkin, 1996: 1-38). Hence, for democracy to work properly, citizens should come to internalize a respect for the opinions of their peers and a concern for their basic rights and interests.[3] Without this respect and concern manifested by citizens as authors of the law, citizens taken as subjects to the laws would have no reason (other than prudential) to defer to majority rule. Accepting the authority of decisions made by others requires first, a belief that their opinions matter as much as ours, and second, some

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[2] See among others Beitz 1989; Cohen 1989; Christiano 2008; Brettschneider 2009.
[3] I focus here on what they owe to their fellow citizens, having explored the cosmopolitan aspect of political education in another article. On this other important issue, see also Culp 2019.

guarantee that they do not entirely disregard our interests and aspirations. These are preconditions for democracy to work in accordance with its normative aims.

These epistemic and moral competencies form an important collective good. Everyone has a strong interest in living in a society in which those who make decisions or empower and control decision-makers are properly informed, in which their opinions are respected, and their fundamental interests are taken into account by their peers. This collective good—the capacity to form considered political judgments—should therefore be at the heart of a democratic political education.

In the introduction, I defined political education as the process by which people come to form political judgments. These judgments typically combine moral values and norms with empirical considerations about how societies work, what motivates people, what markets do, and what kind of effects different public policies produce (Vandamme 2021). Political education as I understand it is not about people telling other people what kind of judgments they should form but points to the process by which people develop their attachment to different values and norms and acquire the empirical knowledge relevant to their political judgments.

What are currently the main drivers of this process? In most societies, the primary context of political education is the family. It is usually in this environment that people are first exposed to political judgments and inculcated with political values, often informally (Muxel 2018), by listening to their parents expressing opinions, judgments, and quite often anger. It is particularly the case for the moral dimension of political judgments (values and norms), but even the epistemic dimension—the empirical beliefs—are initially formed within families before possibly being corrected or altered through schooling and extra-family socialization. Given the key role played by families, it should come as no surprise that many (if not most) people remain faithful to their parents' political orientations, as research in political sociology often reports.[4] Fortunately, though, political education is not reducible to family transmission. As they grow up, kids become more and more exposed to different political views, be it at school or within their social (and then, professional) networks, acquire new relevant knowledge, and can be influenced by all sorts of people and events in this process (Dinas 2014; Muxel 2018). The process of political socialization[5] is notoriously complex and it is difficult to single out one determinant factor shaping political attitudes and beliefs (Cook 2005). It remains true, however, that in the absence of a strong countervailing educational process, families will be a dominant driver of political education, often informally, even without a clear intention by parents to shape the political beliefs of their children. This is likely to be the case in all the countries that do not make political education a key component of basic public education.

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[4] Among classical works on the influence of family interactions, see Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet 1968; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes 1980.

[5] I use political education and political socialization as quasi-synonymous to avoid assuming from the start that political education should be formal and voluntary instead of informal and largely involuntary. However, socialization here should not be understood as becoming allegiant to the existing political order as opposed to a more critical or experimental approach to democratic education (see Biesta 2011).

2.   Why We Cannot Rely on Informal Political Education

Should we be happy with this situation in which the essential collective good of political education is entrusted to an informal process in which families play a central role? It seems to me that family political education, in spite of the diversity of ways in which it materializes in practice,[6] is likely to be deficient in many respects and that the other spaces of socialization usually completing political education processes will often fail to compensate for these deficiencies. The most fundamental flaw is that the main driver of political education, within families, is irrational: it is a form of mimicry. Children often repeat what they hear and observe, and thereby inherit irrationally from their parents' prejudices and dismissive attitudes towards political opponents, or from their—not necessarily well-grounded—opinions on policy issues. Arguably, some parents make efforts to justify their political judgments by providing reasons supporting them and some even try to present opposing views in a way that allows their children to understand where they come from, and why other people see things differently. Nevertheless, this kind of heroic political education is unlikely to be widespread within families. Most of the time, political attitudes are transmitted involuntarily, typically by short comments that parents make on politicians, parties and policy debates (Muxel 2018). Hence, in a world in which families are the primary locus of political education (by shaping children's value orientation and political knowledge), a large portion of it will not be based on reasons. Yet, rationality should matter to all of us. No one wants their children to hold strong false beliefs. We care about transmitting some beliefs because we take them to be true or valid. If they are not, we would want our children to be able to change their beliefs, and this is why rational inquiry matters.

Admittedly, parents have a right to transmit their values and opinions to their children, at least to some extent.[7] This right is grounded in their more general right to freedom of expression and to the more particular parental right to educate their children as they see fit. The point here is not that these rights should be questioned. It is that the *effects* of these legitimate rights should be questioned if their use tends to harm an important collective good. And if it does, we should think about ways of mitigating these effects—without harming these rights if they are well grounded, which I do not question here.

Besides being largely based on unreflective mimicry, family political education is also deficient as far as it is likely to be highly one-sided. Unless parents have differing political views—the exception rather than the general rule (Lampard 1997; Muxel 2018)—and do not mind exposing and explaining their disagreements, most children will lack exposition to counterarguments and countervailing reasons. This might be somewhat mitigated by the presence, in family political discussions, of older siblings who have been exposed to different views outside the family circle. Yet we would still be far from the ideal of deliberative democracy, in which people form their judgments based on an appreciation of the merits of the different arguments and views in contest (Manin 1987; Habermas 1996). And the problem is reinforced by the lack of sociological diversity within families. Some

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[6] Some families surely provide an excellent, balanced political education. Others may be a source of comfort and self-respect for people who are oppressed or disdained in the public sphere, as a reviewer rightly pointed out. I do not want to engage in family-bashing, but to point out some limits of the familial sphere with respect to political education.

[7] For an interesting discussion of the limits of this right with regard to the inculcation of particular ethical or religious views, see Clayton 2006.

relevant social perspectives will inevitably remain excluded from family discussions. As a result, political discussions in the family may simply exhibit the downsides of deliberation by reinforcing some preexisting social and political biases. There is even some empirical evidence that children who talk politics with their parents are more likely than others to share the political views of their parents (Okolikj & Hooghe 2023).

This argument does not imply that family political education is wrong in itself, but that it faces limitations that make it unreliable and insufficient. We have reasons to want people's process of political education to lead to the consideration of a wider diversity of social perspectives than will usually be encountered within families. The fact that people will necessarily be exposed to different perspectives in other spheres of their lives partly compensates for this. However, it is unlikely to be enough. Neighborhoods, private networks and professional environments also quite often lack social mix. The famous informational bubbles created by social networks' algorithms do not help mitigate this either. Families are but one example—though a central one—of the wider problem of echo chambers and lack of cross-group communication in contemporary societies. One could argue that families are likely to be more ideologically diverse nowadays than they were in the past, and this is to be welcomed, but the verdict of political sociology is clear: the logic of ideological transmission is still strong. We cannot therefore expect people to be naturally or spontaneously exposed to a sufficient diversity of political views in the private sphere of their existence.

Finally, comes a third problem: families are not an appropriate environment for political deliberation. Consider two examples. In France, 61% of interviewed parents said they never or rarely talked politics with their children (Muxel 2018). In the USA, a survey[8] found 64% of people saying they discussed politics in their family at least once a month. This may sound more promising than the French result, but a closer look at the survey responses dissipates this impression. Among these 64 %, 53% agree on most issues (which points to the lack of diversity mentioned above), 9% change the subject quickly to avoid disagreements and 5% fight heavily over political debates. This leaves us with only 33% out of the 64% having political discussions who "debate things diplomatically." You might think that it is not that bad, but it means that a large majority of people are deprived of the important benefits of genuine political deliberation if political education occurs primarily within families. What is more, because the problem of lack of diversity and group thinking remains for those who do discuss politics, it seems that very few people, within families and other echo chambers, really benefit from the positive aspects of deliberation.

Again, because families are usually not the *only* context of political socialization, this problem is mitigated to some extent. However, the value of deliberating respectfully with people who think differently, pointed out by many political philosophers (Mansbridge 1981; Elster 1986; Manin 1987; Cohen 1989; Habermas 1996), is threatened if we do not create such spaces of deliberation counter-vailing the one-sided and low-deliberative process occurring within families.

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[8] https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/MTV-AP-NORC-Comparing-the-Political-Views-of-Young-People-and-Their-Parents-Generation.pdf

The value of respectful deliberation is not uncontroversial. Against deliberative approaches to democracy, some philosophers have argued that democracy is necessarily confrontational, or agonistic, and should be so (Mouffe; Medearis 2015). Others would probably downplay the role rationality plays in politics. It is not my intent, however, to defend a strong deliberative approach to democracy. Even people who value the confrontational aspect of politics can recognize the value of forming political judgments based on a confrontation of viewpoints (unless they deny any rationality to political processes). After all, being exposed to different views than the dominant one is the best remedy against the ideology that these theorists usually fight. And claiming that people should ideally hear both sides of a debate before taking sides does not imply that actual political processes should somehow mirror a kind of idealized, consensus-seeking deliberation.[9]

3. Why Schools Have More Potential

Schools,[10] it seems to me, are ideally placed to address these problems faced by family political education. Although they should certainly not be idealized, it seems important to see that they *can* play the role of an important counterweight to the inevitable educational process that will keep occurring within families and in other spheres of people's lives.

First of all, even if it may seem trivial, it is worth pointing to the fact that it is part of schools' mission to help children develop competencies that are socially valuable.[11] If, as argued above, the competency to build considered political judgments is a valuable collective good in a democratic context, this gives at least a *pro tanto* reason to charge schools with the mission to develop this competency as well.[12] One way to override this *pro tanto* reason would be to show that this competency is likely to be developed by most children in other spheres of their lives, which would make school intervention unnecessary. There are reasons to be skeptical about this claim. Surely, as they grow up, people develop a certain understanding of politics, get exposed to some diversity of views, and learn to deal with political conflict. However, this "spontaneous" political education is very unequal and suffers from many drawbacks. People often avoid deep political discussions with people holding opposing views (Mutz 20006). They may form false impressions about politics, parties and politicians based on prejudices inherited from their early socialization (including the family) without ever being deeply challenged. And the dynamic of confirmation biases will make it harder and harder, as time passes, to revise their political judgments and form more considered ones. In this respect, not taking advantage of the twelve years people usually spend in school to work on this seems like a waste of time and opportunity.

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[9] See Elster 1986: 119; Estlund 2008: chap. 13.

[10] My focus is on *mandatory* education, i.e., depending on countries, primary and most of secondary education, because it is there that all citizens are supposed to develop common competencies. Yet, colleges and universities probably have a role to play as well with what regards political education.

[11] In addition to competencies that are valuable for individuals themselves, and in addition to other missions of schools such as socialization and subjectification, for example (see Biesta 2015).

[12] Some have even argued that civic or political education should be the "core purpose of public schooling" (Macedo 2000: 122) or have "moral primacy over other purposes of public education in a democratic society" (Gutmann 1987: 287).

The second reason schools seem appropriate for the task is that they are usually more ideologically diverse than families. For sure, in most countries, much more could be done to promote social mix in schools, which privileged parents put high efforts into avoiding (Swift 2003), but at least public schools are likely to feature more diversity than the typical family circle. Hence, it is an environment potentially favorable to the exchange of different perspectives on issues of public interest.[13]

More diversity of standpoints, by itself, offers prospects of better deliberations (Young 2000; Landemore 2013). What strengthens this point, then, is that teachers are ideally placed to play the role of moderators of peaceful and respectful political debates. For sure, this task is not easy, and there are well-known risks associated with the organization of political debates in the classroom. Things can get heated. Some pupils might be hurt by others' ideas or feel attacked in theirs. However, teachers have the authority to set rules reducing these risks and framing debates. They can start with political topics that are not too sensitive, set clear discussion rules, intervene and even silence pupils when they do not respect the rules, and so on. In addition to organizing the debate or collective inquiry,[14] teachers can also play two valuable roles in promoting quality deliberation: the role of informant or fact-checker when pupils miss factual information, and of devil's advocate (Aikin & Clanton 2010; Manin 2017) when ideological diversity is lacking, and the risk of group polarization is high. Whatever the difficulties associated with running a quality political debate with young people, these debates are likely to be, on average, of much higher quality[15] in a classroom than anywhere else (except in a specifically designed deliberative experiment such as a deliberative mini-public). This openness to inclusive political deliberation that characterizes the school environment partly responds to two of the problems affecting families: the lack of diversity and the lack of taste for non-consensual political discussion.

The other problem diagnosed in the previous section was mimicry. To some extent, it must be admitted, mimicry can occur in schools as well: young people may unreflectively adopt the political views of their peers—or even of their teacher if the latter is authoritarian or charismatic. A large part of the socialization dimension of schools involves this dynamic (Biesta 2015). Yet schools also have the capacity to resist or at least to counter this spontaneous tendency that afflicts us as social beings. By exploring the reasons grounding different political opinions in the classroom, teachers can stimulate internal deliberation, i.e., the process by which individuals form and revise their own judgments based on the information they acquire and the interests they consider (Goodin 2003). Even if pupils are unlikely to change their opinion in a classroom debate, given the psychological pressure to save face in public, exchanges of arguments can destabilize opinions and lead to a posterior, reason-based revision. Hence, a school environment in which future citizens are invited to think about the rational grounding of their political beliefs and opinions, to listen to different perspectives, and to take up

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[13] To what extent it will *actually* be open to such an exchange of perspectives will depend on the varying sensibilities and professional ethics of educational actors, as a reviewer rightly pointed out.
[14] Kauppi and Drerup (2021) have argued for using the Deweyan method of inquiry when addressing controversial issues in the classroom.
[15] There are competing measures of deliberative quality (see Neblo 2007; Bächtiger & Parkinson 2019), but wide agreement on the criteria of *diversity* (of viewpoints expressed), *reason-based arguments*, and *take-up* (of other people's arguments).

counterarguments[16] is highly likely to improve their competency to form considered political judgments.

We therefore have strong reasons to see it as a fundamental mission of schools to develop children's capacity to understand what is at stake in political debates and to engage in political deliberations with respect for other people's opinions, concern for their interests, and a willingness to justify their positions, thereby creating the conditions for a healthier democracy.

This general trust in schools' capacity to deliver adequate political education must nonetheless be qualified. The idea is not to compare a critical account of families with an idealized account of schools. To start with, one cannot deny the fact that, historically, public education has served as one of the most prominent means to promote the dominant culture, the dominant values, silencing some critical perspectives and reconstructing national history to produce allegiant, patriotic citizens (Murphy 2007; Merry 2020). For this reason, the argument put forward in this article should be understood as *contextual*: the claim is that we should entrust schools—and in particular, teachers in the classroom—with the development of the competency to form considered political judgments *in contexts of sufficient political pluralism and respect for basic freedoms, where public education can be expected to be more than the inculcation of the dominant ideology*.[17] Among the preconditions for entrusting schools, we should have guarantees that the educational system is partly independent of the political party in power, cannot be entirely instrumentalized by it, and that teachers enjoy sufficient autonomy in the classroom—that they are not, once again, the simple spokespersons of the party in power. I believe that these conditions are met, albeit imperfectly, in many advanced democracies.

Besides, it is clear that the educational system cannot be entirely disconnected from the economic system and its demand to produce skilled and allegiant workers. This can generate tension with the more critical and reflective aims of political education. Hence, my claim is not that the kind of political education advocated here would smoothly insert itself among other aims imposed on the educational system by the economic and political ones. Neither is the claim that *any* form of political education would be welcomed. As we shall see in the fifth section, it is only citizen-empowering forms of political education that should be welcomed or promoted, not citizen-formatting ones.

Finally, it seems worth pointing to a deep tension between the aim to promote respect and concern for others, which I have argued should be part of political education, and the competitive nature of the school environment. As Richard Wolheim puts it,

> an educational system, which is conceived primarily as a method of social selection, is bound to have the effect of instilling into those who pass through it the morality of competition. (Clayton 2006, 171)[18]

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[16] In sum, to develop the kind of "reflective thinking" promoted by Matthew Lipman yet applied to political judgments: a form of "thinking that is aware of its own assumptions and implications as well as being conscious of the reasons and evidence that support this or that conclusion" (Lipman 2003: 26).

[17] In authoritarian contexts, ironically, the family might be an important and valuable protection against political indoctrination by the state. See Kao 2021.

[18] Richard Wollheim, *Socialism and Culture*, quoted in Clayton 2006: 171.

This, for sure, generates a tension. However, things would be worse for democracy if this competitive aspect of education were not somehow compensated for or balanced with the promotion and development of a concern for others' opinions and interests. A form of moral and political[19] education that infuses the whole curriculum and the schools' ethos[20] could be the appropriate counterweight.

4.   The Fear of Indoctrination

The main reason public authorities and parents are usually reluctant to entrust schools with such a mission is the fear of political indoctrination (Merry 2005; Copp 2016). Indoctrination can be defined as a process fostering the uncritical acceptance of a doctrine.[21] It can be achieved through the use of violence, threat or coercion (Curren 2008), but also more benignly through a lack of intellectual honesty. For example, when teachers unjustifiably defend only one side of the debate on a controversial issue or use their authority to present a contested claim as true without providing supporting evidence or arguments.

Indoctrination thus defined can virtually occur in all educational fields. However, it is in the domains of moral and political education that the fear of indoctrination is the most prevalent given the particular way in which many people are attached to their moral and political beliefs. These beliefs are often associated with a form of urgency and importance that may lower teachers' incentives to behave in the most intellectually honest way although these deeply held convictions are presumptively particularly worthy of respect because of their importance to individuals. Hence, the moral and political convictions of pupils and parents are at the same time important and fragile. This I see as the strongest reason to resist a public program of political education.

This fear is entirely legitimate. Recent history is full of examples of state-led indoctrination campaigns. Her study of the roots of totalitarianism led Hannah Arendt, for example, to reject any attempt to change society through education, among others because it is always those who have been educated in the old model that are in charge of creating a new model of humans (Arendt 1958). However, political education can take many different forms, and as I shall argue in the next section, the form that is needed is not particularly vulnerable to the risk of indoctrination.

What is more, if one wants to avoid a form of status quo bias in argumentation, the risk of indoctrination—accurately assessed, hence not overestimated in contexts of political pluralism—must be put in the balance with the risks associated with the absence of public political education. Considering the limits of family-centered political education, these are also considerable. What is at stake is nothing less than a political system's capacity to deliver collective autonomy and political equality. Furthermore, it is not as if political indoctrination would disappear entirely in the absence of

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[19] As explained above, I believe that there is a necessary *moral* component in *political* education – the respect and concern for others. For a deeper examination of this question, see Hand 2023

[20] Nothing in the argument so far developed suggests that political education should be restricted to a single course, like civic education.

[21] See Sears & Hugues 2006; Copp 2016.

a public program of political education. To a certain extent, it is in a form of political indoctrination that parents often engage, whether they want it or not. Although many of them probably want to avoid *imposing* any view on their children, they do often foster the uncritical acceptance of political ideas. Hence, we face an opposition between two forms of potential indoctrination, public and private. One argument in favor of private indoctrination is that even pushed to the extreme, that is, even if parents were able to determine completely the political views of their children, it would at least preserve political pluralism within society. Children would inherit from the beliefs of their parents, but because there is a plurality of views among parents, pluralism would be preserved in society (though not in families). In contrast, public indoctrination pushed to the extreme, and done effectively, would suppress political pluralism within society.

This, however, is just a thought experiment. In the real world, in contexts of protected political pluralism, both scenarios are implausible. What is likely to happen is a balance of risks between an option with lower quality political education, but lower risks of pluralism-threatening public education, and another option with higher quality political education and higher risks for pluralism. Philosophical reflection alone cannot identify an optimal balance of these risks. Yet, the point is that it is not enough to invoke the risk of public indoctrination to oppose public political education. In light of the latter's potential benefits and of the existence of private forms of indoctrination, the only reasonable conclusion seems to be that we should look for a way to reap the potential benefits of public political education while minimizing the risks of school indoctrination.

5.   A Neutral Political Education?

Can public political education achieve this aim by being neutral? Claims of neutrality have often been denounced, with reason, as hiding bias, prejudice and domination (Freire 1970; Youung 2000). It must be acknowledged that it would be impossible for teachers in charge of developing political skills to be completely neutral. The choice of topics to address or debate, the way to present different positions on a controversial issue, and so on, are very likely to betray a personal attachment to some values and political commitments (Hytten 2015). This does not mean, however, that it is meaningless for teachers to *aim* at a form of objectivity[22] in the face of social facts and impartiality on reasonably controversial[23] issues. Between illusory neutrality and unabashed activism, there is room for an educational attitude that may be driven by a willingness to make the world better yet demonstrating intellectual honesty, fallibilism and respect for opposed opinions. Such attitudes that preserve an attachment to objectivity and impartiality as regulative ideals seems required by a respect for pupils' autonomy. And in this endeavor, it matters that teachers show themselves aware of their vulnerability to biases.[24] No one is immune to biases. Such self-critical awareness should therefore be an important

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[22] Some will prefer to use the term "balance" to make it clear that full objectivity is impossible (see Oulton et al. 2004), but it is also possible to consider objectivity and impartiality as regulative ideals, that can never really be achieved but are still worth pursuing.

[23] The crux of the ethics of teaching is to be able to distinguish reasonable from unreasonable controversies (Hand 2008; Maxwell 2023).

[24] There is an interesting debate about when it is more appropriate for teachers who aim at a form of impartiality to be open about their own normative commitments and when it seems preferable to hide them (see Kelly 1986). The most appropriate attitude may vary depending on the age of the learners and considerations about the particular relationship that teachers may have with learners in different contexts.

part of their professional ethics and training. Its promotion can even be seen as a condition of legitimacy of a public program of political education.

Furthermore, teachers should not see it as their mission to politicize pupils,[25] but to develop their political competencies, which is quite different. Recall the two basic competencies that political education ought to promote. The first is to form informed judgments about policy debates. The second is to engage in deliberations and be able and willing to revise one's judgments in the face of other people's arguments and legitimate claims. These competencies can be developed with a relatively low risk of indoctrination.

The first requires adequate training in the social sciences, which already exists in many countries but could be much more developed. There will certainly be differences of emphasis from one teacher to another—reinforced by the fact that social scientists are themselves politically divided and that their scientific work is not immune to ideology—but it does not seem utopian to imagine a curriculum aiming at a form of balance between economics and sociology, understanding of market dynamics and of the reproduction of inequality, among others. What should matter primarily for teachers is their pupils' capacity to understand the sources of political disagreements. This competency also requires basic training in political philosophy and in the history of ideas to understand the different ideologies and normative conflicts structuring contemporary political debates (Dworkin 2006: 147-150). In this respect again, teachers should be trained to present the diversity of positions in the most intellectually honest way. This is certainly a challenge, but not a utopian aim, given that teachers' training programs often already contain this kind of training to educational ethics (Maxwell 2017). Besides, on average, teachers are *much* more likely than parents to introduce politics in a balanced way, because they are trained for it, have professional incentives to do it properly, and are monitored to some extent.

What the second competency requires is well expressed by Matthew Clayton:

> a set of skills and virtues related to deliberative interaction: skills related to articulating a position and the reasons for its affirmation; listening skills; the ability charitably to understand the views of others; analytical skills that facilitate a critical assessment of different positions; an appreciation of the benefits of exchanging ideas; and a commitment to reason rather than to employ attractive slogans or rhetoric. (2006, 147)

This is the *deliberative* aspect, which is at the heart of dialogic teaching and many methods of philosophy for children. Another important aspect mentioned earlier, however, is the willingness to take into account, in our judgments, other people's interests and aspirations. This education to *moral decentration* may be harder to achieve because there is little that teachers can do to educate hard-boiled egoists (Vandamme 2013). Nevertheless, it is also something that can be trained to some extent, by a

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[25] In this respect, the pedagogy of the oppressed defended by Paulo Freire is at the edge, because of an internal tension between the promotion of pupils' autonomy and a willingness to raise their consciousness of the injustices they suffer from. Of course, his progressive agenda looks attractive from the perspective of those who largely share his political views. Nevertheless, they must imagine how they would react to such a consciousness-raising agenda piloted by a conservative or neoliberal movement. To be publicly defendable in a pluralist society, a political education program must show a clear attachment to objectivity and impartiality, combined with an awareness of the risks of bias. Some degree of consciousness-raising might be compatible with that, but probably not all forms of it.

combination of encounters with different and concrete others, literary imagination,[26] as well as exercises inviting pupils to consider things from other people's perspectives or to seek principles of action that no one could reasonably reject (Scanlon 1998). This more procedural part of political education (deliberation and decentration) does not seem to face a high risk of indoctrination.

Considering all this, I hope to have made it clear that a political education program enhancing future citizens' political competencies does not need to be in strong tension with the aims of objectivity and impartiality. Thus, the fear of indoctrination is absolutely legitimate in general, but it does not rule out the kind of political education that seems necessary for democracy to honor its normative aims. An important distinction should be made between forms of political education that aim at empowering citizens and increasing their capacity to effectively pursue their own ends, and ones aiming at formatting citizens, be it by defending existing social, economic and political institutions, or by one-sidedly criticizing them. Only the citizen-empowering form of political education should be promoted, or welcomed if it is promoted by some political actors.

Conclusion

Political judgments should ideally be formed based on reliable and balanced information about policy debates, as well as respect and concern for our fellow citizens, translating into a willingness to revise our judgments in the face of their legitimate claims. The reason the process by which people come to form these political judgments matters importantly is that the capacity of a political community to enact laws appropriate for its aims, and to do this in a spirit of political equality, depends on it. Hence, a quality political education is undeniably an important collective good from a democratic perspective.

To the extent that parents care about democracy and about their children's political autonomy, they should therefore be strongly in favor of the kind of citizen-empowering form of public political education defended in this article. The problem is of course that many parents, in spite of what they would publicly affirm, care more about transmitting their own values than about promoting their children's autonomy, let alone promoting democracy. What it means, however, is that a publicly defendable argument can be made for pursuing appropriate forms of political education through the educational system and making more room for politics in the classrooms.

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[26] See Nussbaum 2016.

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