
Democracy & Education

Democratic Education in Conservative Christian Schools

Jeremy Alexander (Boston College)

Abstract

This essay examines conservative Christian schools through the lens of democratic education theory in order to understand how these educational institutions might or might not be consistent with the principles of a liberal democracy. I identify four key characteristics of conservative Christian schools, including the way they attempt to withdraw from society, the important role of authority and control in these spaces, their lack of diversity, and the presence of a politically conservative ideology. By examining these characteristics through the lens of democratic education, it becomes apparent that the arrangement and ethos of conservative Christian schools are not fully consistent with the principles of democratic education. With reference to the four key characteristics identified, Christian schools do not have a strong emphasis on civics education, do not develop a thoughtful pluralism, and do not aim to develop autonomy, all of which are key components in for a democratic education.

Submit a response to this article

Submit online at democracyeducationjournal.org/home

Read responses to this article online

<http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol30/iss1/2>

IN 1980, PAUL Kienel, the founder and executive director of the Association of Christian Schools International, wrote, “The unofficial partnership between the Protestant Church and the public school is in decline. Therefore, we are taking the initiative to reestablish quality, Protestant education in our country” (as cited in Rose, 1988, p. 32). With this statement, Kienel both expressed the way that many conservative Protestant Christians felt about the public schools and explained a significant motivation that animated these believers to build conservative Protestant Christian schools throughout the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States (Carper & Layman, 2002; Reese, 2007). During this time, many parents who identified as fundamentalist or evangelical Christians withdrew their children from public schools and began to form Christian schools organized around the Bible, church, and family because they perceived public schools as secular places that were antithetical to their faith (Reese, 2007; Sikkink, 2001). The Christian schools that emerged at this time, and still exist today, were intended to do more than teach

students how to read and write. They aimed to form students into citizens who would hold fast to and embody Christian ideals. Of course, students who graduate from Christian schools become members of a public that extends beyond the Christian community. Fienberg (2006) has argued that the larger public should take an interest in religious schools because these students eventually participate in a wider democratic society, and it is important to understand how prepared these students are to help sustain that democratic society.

JEREMY ALEXANDER is a PhD student in the Teaching, Curriculum, and Society Department of the Lynch School of Education & Human Development at Boston College. His present research interest focuses on the various ways faith-based schools function as sites of political socialization and how these sites intersect with democratic education.

Many Christian schools withdrew from mainstream society in order to build alternative institutions that families and churches could control and which would help reproduce Christian values in students (Rose, 1988). With the combination of family, church, and school, a powerful network of socialization was created to help impart to students a singular and total vision of the meaning and purpose of life that are antagonistic to secular orderings of life (Peshkin, 1986). It has long been argued by some that these conservative Christian institutions run counter to democratic values not because their singular vision of truth as given by God but because of their lack of toleration and appreciation for the views of those who disagree and order life differently (Apple, 2006; Blacker, 1998). This conclusion about Christian schools, however, depends on the assumption that they organize life for students and influence students' understanding about their place in the world in ways that run counter to visions of a pluralistic democracy.

This essay examines a particular kind of Christian schooling through the lens of democratic education theory in order to understand how these educational institutions might or might not be consistent with the principles of a liberal democracy. To do so, the first section of this essay focuses on explaining democratic education as a theory. This section explores foundational principles of democratic education that function as a lens through which to view conservative Christian schools. In the second section of the essay, I offer a description of what I refer to as conservative Christian schooling, a specific category of Christian schools identified by the National Center for Education Statistics as having membership in at least one of four associations: Accelerated Christian Education, American Association of Christian Schools, Association of Christian Schools International, or Oral Roberts University Educational Fellowship. These schools tend to be politically conservative and hold to conservative Christian beliefs such as the infallibility of Scripture, the need for salvation through Jesus, and that Christianity holds the "truth" about the world and humanity (Wagner, 1997). In this section of the essay, I explain four aspects of the structure and way of life at conservative Christian schools that are relevant to how students are socialized into citizenship. Each of the four aspects is explained and analyzed through the lens of democratic education. It becomes clear that in many important ways, conservative Christian schools run counter the goals of democratic education but also provide a complex picture of what it means to prepare students as citizens.

Christian Schools and Democracy: Framing the Conversation

Since conservative Christian schools serve only about 700,000 students across the United States (out of the more than 56 million students who attend school), it might be easy to write these schools off as insignificant (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). However, there are several reasons why the larger public should be interested in these institutions. The first reason is the resurgence of Christian nationalism in American politics and society during the beginning of the 21st century. Whitehead and Perry (2020) have defined Christian nationalism as "an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture"

(p. ix-x). While religion, specifically Protestant Christianity, has always played a role in American political and social life, there has been a growing public resurgence of Christian nationalism that was especially evident in the politics of former President Donald Trump. Many white evangelicals have supported a political-religious ideology that combines nativist politics, fear of non-European immigrants, social conservatism, and the desire to recover a kind of "Golden Age" of America's past (Gorski, 2017). Gorski (2017) has explained that while Christian nationalism is not synonymous with evangelicalism, it is estimated that as many as 50% of evangelicals hold political ideas that are consistent with the ideas of Christian nationalists, as spelled out previously. Understanding conservative Christian schools can lead to new understandings about how these schools might be reproducing this cultural framework in young citizens.

A second reason the public should be interested in these institutions is because they are well positioned to grow in the coming years. Some conservative Christian schools have been and will continue to be recipients of public vouchers that cover the cost of tuition. These voucher programs help to increase recruitment and attendance in these schools (Blosser, 2019). Furthermore, recent legal decisions have made it easier for federal money to fund religious schools (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002; *Espinoza v. Montana Dept. of Revenue*, 2020). Conservative Christian schools also face possible growth because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis and the response by many school districts to offer education remotely has caused many families to withdraw from public school in favor of private schooling, which has been more likely to provide in person learning experiences (Reilly, 2020). The continued crises in education due to COVID-19 and the ability of families to cover private religious school tuition through vouchers positions these schools to grow in coming years.

Analyzing Christian schools can be conceptually and methodologically difficult for many reasons. Of particular interest here is the question of how to name and categorize various Christian schools. There is no universal consensus regarding terminology or now universal system for grouping these schools together. Some prefer the language of *evangelical schools* or *evangelical Protestant schools*; others have used the term *fundamentalist Christian schools*, and still others simply use *Christian schools* (Rose, 1993; Sikkink, 2018; Stitzlein, 2008). While there are often nuanced differences and justification for these various terms, there is also considerable overlap between these different terms (Reese, 2007; Sikkink, 2001). For the purposes of this essay, I have adopted the language of *conservative Christian schools*, which is used by the National Center of Educational Statistics. This term demarcates specific kinds of Christian schools, which belong to one of four national associations and share overlapping features, which will be further explained (Broughman et al., 2019). The next section lays out a theory of democratic education, which serves as a lens for examining conservative Christian schools.

Democratic Education

Democratic education is a broad theoretical tradition that focuses on the connections between schooling, education, and public life

in a democracy. The broadness of this tradition has led to democratic education being framed in various ways. In fact, in a recent review of articles that discussed democratic education between 2006–2017, Sant (2019) identified as many as nine different ways that this theoretical tradition has been framed and taken up to talk about democracy, citizenship, and education.

The treatment of democratic education offered in this essay is grounded in the tradition of liberal democracy, which centers the rights of individuals, the freedom of those individuals to choose their own good in life, and the value of pluralism where individuals interact together in a common society (Feinberg, 2006). Callan (1997) has claimed “the liberal democratic tradition is a complex narrative that weaves together stories of philosophical reflection, social activism, political accomplishment and failure, all revolving around the ideal of free and equal citizenship” (p. 126). While there are other ways to support and discuss democratic education, the tradition of liberalism provides a valuable framework to think about connections between democracy and education. As Sant (2019) remarked, “liberalism is likely the most powerful discourse shaping the meaning of democratic education” (p. 663).

To describe democratic education, I drew from three theorists: Callan (1997), Gutmann (1999), and Levinson (1999). There are several reasons for focusing on these thinkers. First, these scholars have focused significant attention on both political and educational theory in their writings to clarify the connections among democracy, citizenship, and education. Second, these thinkers have been foundational to conversations concerning democratic education over the past 30 years. Finally, all three of these scholars work within the liberal democratic tradition, and thus share similar assumptions and goals for democratic education.

A central part of democratic education is structuring schooling in a manner that educates children in and for the complex demands of participating in a pluralistic democratic society. Drawing on the work of Callan (1997), Guttmann (1999), and Levinson (1999), I argue that there are three foundational principles necessary for democratic education. The first principle is that democratic education is a civics education that seeks to cultivate democratic skills, values, and dispositions in students. Second, there is a commitment to the value of pluralism. The third principle is that democratic education ought to help develop an individual’s autonomy. I develop each of these principles in more detail. However, it is important to understand here that these principles are not isolated from one another; rather, they reinforce and support each other. This means that with the omission of any one of these principles, the whole of democratic education is weakened. Of course, there are other aspects that are important to democratic education; however, these three principles are essential pieces of the foundation of a democratic theory of education upon which other ideas are built.

Providing a Civics Education

Callan (1997), Gutmann (1999), and Levinson (1999) all argued that the cultivation of democratic citizens requires schools to make a commitment to teaching students democratic skills, values, and dispositions. This means that democratic education ought to

help develop within students “the capacity to understand and evaluate different ways of living” (Gutmann, 1999, p. 44). Certain skills and dispositions are necessary for this kind of understanding and evaluation, such as critical judgment, reflectiveness, toleration, mutual respect, trust, care, and understanding (Levinson, 1999). These skills are grounded in commitments to regard others as free and equal citizens (Callan, 1997). While this is not an exhaustive list, it indicates the kinds of skills that help students to participate in a democratic society.

To function well within a democratic society, citizens need to cultivate the disposition to value others through mutual respect. This mutual respect requires “a reciprocal positive regard among people who advocate morally reasonable but opposing positions in politics” (Gutmann, 1995, p. 578). Participation in a liberal democracy requires that people be able to recognize that others may reasonably choose goods in life that are different than what they themselves might choose (Callan, 1997, p. 66). Democratic education sees schools as sites where these democratic skills and dispositions ought to be cultivated.

Commitment to Pluralism

The second principle of democratic education is a commitment to the value of pluralism. In a pluralistic society, there are real substantial differences and thus one must learn how to have reasonable dialogue with those whose way of life may seem strange or different. A truly democratic education recognizes this pluralism in society and helps students learn to value this pluralism.

In light of the reality that many people do order their lives differently in a democratic society, Gutman (1999) proposed the principle of non-repression as a guide for education. By this, she meant that various ways of life and political ideas should not be repressed or prevented from being discussed in schools. Gutmann (1999) claimed, “Non-repression prohibits educational authorities from shielding students from reasonable political views represented by the adult citizenry or from censoring reasonable challenges to those views” (p. 98). While Gutmann phrased this principle in the negative, the central argument is that in schools, students ought to encounter a plurality of ideas in order to be prepared for the pluralism of society.

Schools ought to be places where students are exposed to the pluralism of society and learn to reasonably challenge various viewpoints, including their own. Pluralism in democratic education is about allowing multiple perspectives so that the lives and understandings that students develop can be enlarged by their engagement with various ideas. As Gutmann (1999) explained, “pluralism is an important political value insofar as social diversity enriches our lives by expanding our understanding of differing ways of life” (p. 33). Schools ought to both reflect and value pluralism and difference so that students learn how to function with others in society in a manner that is democratic and so that their own lives may be enhanced.

Developing Autonomy

The third principle of democratic education is the development of autonomy. In their work on democracy and education, both Callan

(1997) and Levinson (1999) discussed autonomy as a capacity or condition that is developed in individuals over time. More specifically, Levinson (1999) defined autonomy as “the capacity to form a conception of the good, to evaluate one’s values and ends with the genuine possibility of revising them should they be found wanting, and then to realize one’s revised ends” (p. 15). A truly democratic education ought to help develop this capacity in students.

Autonomy as a capacity implies both the ability to critically reflect on beliefs and the agency to act upon those beliefs. It is the combination that allows persons to claim beliefs as truly their own (Levinson, 1999). Callan (1997) referred to this critical reflection as a kind of “practical reason” that allows a person to evaluate the values she may hold for herself and the values others hold (148). To be fully autonomous, it is not enough to simply develop the ability to exercise this practical reasoning, one must also have the agency to choose based on practical reasoning. But to exercise this agency, individuals need to be grounded in a particular tradition. Autonomy is not developed from a place of neutrality but requires what Levinson (1999) called a sense of self identity or “cultural coherence” (p. 91). This cultural coherence as a kind of “membership in a community and embeddedness within a cultural and normative framework” (p. 56). Cultural coherence offers an abiding sense of self and gives one a place from which to be critical. For both Callan (1997) and Levinson (1999), this cultural coherence comes primarily from the home, but other institutions such as religious communities and schools can also help develop this coherence.

In democratic education, the development of autonomy is connected with pluralism in that it is through engagement with a pluralistic society that autonomy comes into full view. Levinson (1999) has argued a pluralistic environment allows one to be presented with values and opinions that differ and are held by other reasonable people. Callan (1997) made a similar claim when he explained that it is in the presence of “reasonable others” that people come to understand their own judgments concerning the world and can start to see the reasonableness other judgments (p. 667). As individuals encounter others, their own worlds can be enlarged and challenged. They are able to see other possibilities and think critically about their own lives.

Democratic educational theory understands that schooling is a way of reproducing society and seeks to cultivate a citizenry able to participate in and further liberal democracy. This means that the skills and dispositions necessary for participation in democratic life ought to be explicitly taught and cultivated in schools. It also entails schooling should be committed to a plurality of views on the good life. And finally, democratic education requires educating for the development of autonomy and the ability to not just choose a way in life, but to critically examine those choices. With this basic understanding of democratic education, it is possible to turn attention to conservative Christian schools.

Conservative Christian Schools

When talking about Christian schools, it is important to define as thoroughly as possible what kinds of schools are being included

or excluded in this category. As previously mentioned, I have adopted the language of *conservative Christian schools*, which is based on the categorization used by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The term *conservative Christian schools* is one of four categories used by the NCES to track religious schools. According to the NCES categorization, conservative Christian schools belong to at least one of four (inter)national associations: ACE, AACCS, ACSI, or Oral Roberts University Education Fellowship (Broughman et al., 2019). These associations can be described as broadly holding to an evangelical theology, meaning that they ascribe to the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, humanity’s need for salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus, and the idea that Christianity represents “the truth” about the world & humanity (Association of Christian Schools International [ACSI], 2020a). Beyond sharing this evangelical theology, all four of these national associations are ecumenical, allowing schools from various Protestant churches or traditions to coexist within the association.

It should be noted that while conservative Christian schools share much in common, there is still variety among these schools (Blosser, 2017; Sikkink, 2001). These schools share a common evangelical theology, at least as stated; however, they sometimes differ in their understandings of how to engage with broader aspects of society and the ultimate aims of schooling (Rose, 1988). Some take an oppositional stance to secular culture and attempt to withdraw or separate from this influence and view education as a means to socialize students into a Christian community (Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988). Others see themselves as engaging with or trying to influence the American public by educating students to go out into the world with their faith and influence others (Green, 2006; Sikkink, 2018). However, while schools may engage with public life differently, across all these schools, there is a dualism between the secular world and religious life.

Despite the differences and variations within this group, it is still possible to talk about the tendencies that conservative Christian schools embody. Each school may embody this worldview somewhat differently; however, because of their shared theological commitments and the dualism they create between sacred and secular, it is possible to understand a family resemblance between these schools that allows them to be described as a unified group.

To understand conservative Christian schools and create an accurate picture of this diverse group of schools, I start with Peshkin’s (1986) foundational ethnographic work on Bethany Baptist Academy, *God’s Choice*, which was published more than 35 years ago. I also draw on several other ethnographic studies which attempt to describe life within conservative Christian schools (Blosser, 2019; Guhin, 2020; Wagner, 1990). Building on this body of work, I add qualitative studies on Christian schools to help further understand these sites. While it is necessary to recognize that some of the studies are dated and schools are continually changing in response to both inside and outside influences, combining these portraits with more contemporary research helps to see consistent patterns and characteristics. Based

on this body of literature, I highlight several reoccurring themes linked with concerns of democratic education and issues of citizenship. I organize these themes into four major features that help characterize conservative Christian schools through the lens of democratic education: separation from the world, the importance of authority and control, a lack of diversity, and the presence of a politically conservative ideology.

These four features form an interrelated web of ideas that helps capture the ethos of conservative Christian schools. These ideas interact with one another and amplify each other, thus forming a whole way of doing and thinking about schooling. However, it should be noted that while these four features support and reinforce each other, these ideas are not necessarily present to the same degree in every conservative Christian school. Again, because of the diversity among conservative Christian schools, it is important to see these features as tendencies rather than identity markers (Sikkink, 2001).

Separated from the World

The most prevalent feature of conservative Christian schools is their desire to be places of separation from the world. Along these lines, Peshkin (1986) found that Bethany Baptist Academy functioned “as a fortress vis-à-vis the rest of the world,” sheltering and separating students from nonbelievers and wider culture (p. 282). While there have always been Protestant schools in America, conservative Christian schools emerged in the mid-20th century when evangelicals and fundamentalists experienced dissatisfaction “with the ongoing secularization of public education, a resurgent evangelical faith, and, in some cases, fears related to desegregation” (Carper & Laymen, 2002, p. 504; see also Blosser, 2019; Nevin & Bills, 1976). This led many believers to withdraw from public education and create their own Christian schools. Separateness became a defining feature of these institutions and led to the development of Christian school associations, which were necessary to support and maintain these schools.

By definition, conservative Christian schools belong to associations that provide accreditation, curriculum, help with school governance, and many of the support systems secular school associations already offered to private schools. These associations are committed to the uniqueness of Christian education, which is seen as distinct and separate from secular education. The vision of the ACSI, the largest of the four associations serving conservative Christian schools, is that the association would “become a leading international organization that promotes Christian education and provides training and resources to Christian schools and Christian educators” (ACSI, 2021). As these Christian associations developed over time and offered more services, they provided an alternative for conservative Christian schools that still needed a support system to function but did not want to be partnered with secular associations (Rose, 1988). Not only were these associations the result of conservative Christian schools’ desire for separation but they also helped advance that separation by offering distinctive Christian curriculum and accreditation.

A clear area that manifests the separation of conservative Christian schools from other schools is the curriculum used. All four of the associations considered a part of conservative Christian schooling either provide curriculum that is “intentionally rooted in biblical truth” (Purposeful Design Publication, 2021) or encourage schools to use existing Christian curriculum materials so as to avoid secular influence. As Cox et al. (2007) explained, the curriculum and textbooks used in schools ought to reflect a biblical worldview, an emphasis on Christian character qualities, and biblical concepts relevant to academic studies (p. 183). To further this end, the most commonly used Christian textbook publishers among conservative Christian schools are from Bob Jones University Press or A Beka Book (Lee, 2015). Despite the desire for Christian material in the curriculum, some schools do choose to use material from non-Christian publishers. When schools do this, they often engage with that material in a way that highlights a difference and disagreement. For example, Rose’s (1988) ethnographic research on Christians schools in New York state described a school that used “secular material in order to judge what is godly and ungodly . . . [and] teach their children discernment” (p. 75). The use of these materials is engaged in critically with an attempt to discern the difference in worldview or life perspective.

The associations that support conservative Christian schools also provide accreditation services for schools, which seeks to ensure the presence of a Christian philosophy of education that focuses on key areas such as biblical worldview and spiritual formation, along with academic knowledge and skills (ACSI, 2020b). A. C. Janney, the founder of American Association of Christian Schools, wrote about the importance of having Christian associations accrediting Christian schools. He stated, “It is time that we establish God’s standards and leave the world out. Accreditation can be a blessing—if it’s accreditation by God’s people, for God’s people . . . with God’s stamp of approval on it” (as cited in Peshkin, 1986, p. 36). The separation from the secular world created the need for associations to come alongside these schools and in turn these associations aided in this separation.

It is important to note that the separation desired in conservative Christian schools is never complete. At best, Christian schools became religious versions of the institution of education, with many of the cultural norms and values still intact, such as academic excellence and competition, even if they are hidden by a Christian veneer. In her study of Christian schools, for example, Wagner (1990) explained the compromise that Christians schools make, often unwittingly, with secular society. She claimed Christian schools are “a culture which is made up of this Christian ideology, with the vocabulary and maxims of the education profession added in, and commingled with the forms and symbols of American popular culture” (p. 67). More recently, Blosser (2019) also has claimed “despite Christian schools’ reputation for being separatist, . . . Christian schools are open systems. They are exposed to many of the same educational messages as public schools and often feel pressure to respond to the messages in an effort to compete with public schools” (p. 11). These schools and their students cannot operate in a vacuum; indeed, they interact regularly with popular media, community sports leagues, colleges

and university, and market themselves to families (Wagner, 1990). Thus, while a desire for separation is a driving feature of conservative Christian schools, this separation is neither complete nor pure.

Conservative Christian schools desire a separation from the world, and therefore, secular civic and democratic goals are often not central to the mission of these schools (Sikkink, 2018, p. 103). But this fails to understand that what students learn in school about themselves, society, and politics is not always explicitly taught by the schools. Students are often shaped by the implicit messages communicated in schooling that exert their power in shaping students specifically because they are taken-for-granted and go unmentioned. The separatist feature of many conservative Christian schools signals to students that participation in the public sphere is either unnecessary or ought to be done only in order to protect one's own individual rights or perceived goods of the Christian community.

This poses two dangers for a larger democratic society. First, the separation can lead to a lack of political concern or trust for those outside the community. This lack of concern or trust erodes democratic communities which are built on the need to depend on and trust at some level strangers (Allen, 2004). The second danger this separation can lead to is support of Christian nationalism. If this separation develops notions that conservative Christian schools are the guardians of American values and freedoms, as some have argued (Slater, 2019), this can lead to students unknowingly embracing Christian nationalism that argues to preserve or return to a mythical past where Christian values were central to American life (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). This means that these schools would be aligning themselves more with a specific political ideology than helping to form a religious community engaging in the practice of Christianity.

Structures of Authority and Control

A second feature of conservative Christian schools is the importance placed on authority structures and obedience. Guhin (2020) used the work of Max Weber to describe authority as a socially legitimate form of power, which entails the ability to "impose a will (or a perceived will) upon a person or the world" (p. 12). Conservative Christian schools place a high value on authority because the authority of teachers, administrators, and parents is perceived to be connected with the authority of God. Whether it is through student handbooks, dress codes, or classroom rules, submission to authority figures is seen as analogous with submission to God (Rose, 1988). Because of this connection between earthly and divine authority, obedience to school authorities is thought to facilitate and prepare students to obey God (Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988).

Research on conservative Christian schools in the 1980s and 1990s often characterized these schools as authoritarian, using their authority to censor reading material and ultimately dismiss students or staff who disagreed or differed from the school culture (Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988; Wagner, 1990). Yet more recent studies present a picture of changing approaches in the use of authority. Sikkink (2018) researched six evangelical Christian schools across the U.S. and found that most students did not think about their

teachers or leaders as being "super strict" (p. 94). Instead, it appeared that "most of the teachers and administrators in the schools took up authoritative, but not authoritarian, attitudes" (p. 98). This aligned with Guhin's (2020) ethnography of two Christian schools in New York, where he found that authority was exercised by the school and teachers in such a way that students thought they demonstrated genuine care for them and their well-being. But even when authority is wrapped in care and concern, it can still present a set order and hierarchy to students that exerts a powerful force upon them.

Authority is worked out in conservative Christian schools in interesting ways. For example, the curriculum from ACE structures and controls students in schools. ACE provides a strict curriculum designed in workbooks referred to as PACEs. These are "individualized, self-instructional" texts that students work on in cubicles on their own, with no instruction from the teacher or engagement with others (ACE, 2021). Schools that use the ACE curriculum tend to be highly regimented and use rules to structure student behavior. For example, students signal to their teachers by raising different colored flags depending on whether they have a question, have completed an assignment, or have another need (Rose, 1988, p. 132). Through this curriculum, schooling becomes highly formalized and fails to facilitate engagement with others over material.

A very different example of how authority is exercised in conservative Christian schools is the way gender is understood in these communities. In many of these schools, there are clearly defined gender roles surrounding concepts of manhood and womanhood (Peshkin, 1986). Early research on conservative Christian schools, like Wagner's (1990) ethnographic work, found this to be the case when it came to dress code policies that made clear distinctions between what was appropriate for males and females. The controlling of gender distinctions also appeared regarding issues surrounding student leadership. While most schools have policies that regulate who is allowed to hold school or class leadership positions, some reserve these roles exclusively for male students (Peshkin, 1986; Stitzlein, 2008). More recently, it appears that conservative Christian schools express a more complex stance toward gender. In his study of two Christian schools in New York City, Guhin (2020) found that girls did indeed learn that women ought to be submissive and domestic, but at the same time they received messages about opportunities for advancement to college and within careers, as well as opportunities for leadership that were open to all students.

While some of the strict gender codes may be changing, there remains a tendency to use authority to silence, marginalize, and control issues of gender. Despite more opportunities and apparent equality, the contemporary authoritative message offered at conservative Christian schools is often one of female passivity and submission to male leaders, which carries implications of a domestic role for woman. Conservative Christian schools still create and preserve what Blosser (2019) called "the cultural hegemony of conservative Christianity" (p. 103).

When it comes to authority and control, the concern is not the use of authority itself, but the ends and purposes this authority is

used for. It seems that in conservative Christian schools, authority is often used coercively to maintain boundaries and reinforce ideological claims. Alternatively, authority could be used in a noncoercive manner to guide and help students develop their own autonomy as members in both a religious community and a larger public.

Inclusion and Diversity

Regarding schools, diversity is defined in many ways, though often the focus is concerned with race and ethnicity (Blosser, 2017). In terms of racial diversity, the NCES reports that 67% of students who attend conservative Christian schools identify as white (Broughman et al., 2019). However, those who have researched these schools tell a more complex narrative. In his study of six different evangelical schools scattered throughout the U.S., Sikkink (2018) found that “racial and ethnic distribution was predominantly white, with small percentages (1–5 percent) being Hispanic or African American” (p. 93). This is also consistent with Blosser’s (2019) work on racial diversity at conservative Christian schools. The school in her research had only 9% of the student body identifying as persons of color (Blosser, 2019, p. 26). Beyond the percentages of racial composition of these schools, diversity needs to be seen through the concept of fit.

Since conservative Christian schools are private, they have a range of admission policies. On the one hand, they can make faith and doctrinal agreement a part of admission, while on the other hand, many have an “open” admission policy that admits nonbelievers as well as believers (Peshkin, 1986, p. 48). Regardless of the specific admission policy, conservative Christian schools “tend to select a relatively homogeneous student population, most often drawn from the ranks of the sponsoring congregation” (Rose, 1988, p. 150). And when there is no sponsoring church, conservative Christian schools use the concept of fit as a guiding principle for admission (Blosser, 2019).

Blosser’s (2019) ethnographic work on race and conservative Christian schools claimed that most conservative Christian schools use a theological anthropology that says all humanity is created in God’s image to support colorblind ideas concerning race and diversity (see also Guhin, 2020). Since all people are said to be created in the image of God, race ought to not factor into how a student or family is viewed. This allows schools to use the amorphous term *fit* to maintain the status quo in admissions (Blosser, 2019). Thus, priority in admission is given to families who fit the dominant cultural and mission of the school. For the school Blosser (2019) studied, fit translated into families who wanted a specifically Christian education and were two-parent nuclear families, and meant that any diversity should not change the cultural make up or ethos of the school. The notion of fit built on a colorblind approach to diversity helped to maintain cultural hegemony and helped ensure the school had the right kind of diversity.

Blosser (2017) also found that cultivating diversity at conservative Christian schools excludes LGBT+ students and students from other religious traditions because these ways of living or ordering the world are seen as running counter to Christian belief

and thus fail to fit with the school (Smith, 2021). These schools often have policies, such as dress codes or bathroom and locker room use, that marginalize or silence students who might identify as LGBT+ and communicate to them a sense of being “second-class” (Joldersma, 2016, p. 42).

Diversity must be expanded beyond race and other identity markers in order to consider how many conservative Christian schools foster homogeneous ways of thinking that results in a high degree of like-mindedness. Part of the nature of these schools is that they seek to teach and replicate a particular way of seeing the world (Blosser, 2019; Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988). Peshkin (1986) and Rose (1988) both found that teachers rarely discussed different viewpoints or perspectives because, as Rose pointed out, the goal of teaching is often to secure “consensus on fundamental beliefs and norms” (p. 150). This appears to have been the case not only in the 1980s, when Peshkin and Rose did their research, but also in more recent studies of conservative Christian schools. For example, Blosser (2019) discovered that different viewpoints were discussed in a manner that often minimized their complexity or the way teachers and students engaged with these viewpoints was a superficial attempt to demonstrate the truth and superiority of Christianity. This way of teaching silenced genuine inquire into various perspectives and helped to perpetuate conformality.

At first glance, the lack of diversity in conservative Christian schools seems to be problematic for shaping citizens who will participate in a diverse society; however, this may be more complex than it seems. Hess and McAvoy (2015) have found that like-minded schools have political benefits for students. They have claimed that coming from a like-minded context “greatly increases the likelihood that young adults will be politically engaged” (p. 146). Furthermore, they found that students from contexts that are like-minded demonstrate more ideological coherence than their peers. However, McAvoy et al. (2014) also found, while these students may be more coherent in their views and politically engaged, like-minded schools also tend to produce students that are more partisan and unable to deliberate with others. This paints a more complex picture that indicates that like-minded schools can produce politically active citizens, but ones who may embody their citizenship in ways that are not fully democratic.

The inability to cultivate compromise and allow for a variety of perspectives is problematic for democratic education. The lack of students learning how to compromise has been noted since Peshkin (1986) discussed this in his seminal work on Bethany Baptist Academy. Blosser (2019) has built off Peshkin’s argument and explained:

Christian schools depend on Americans’ value of pluralism for their survival, but pluralism isn’t a value they are willing to instill in their students. Rather, Christian school students are taught that other people’s beliefs are wrong and to react defensively to disagreements with their theology. (p. 124)

It is the very openness of society that allows conservative Christian schools to exist; however, this same openness is not cultivated within these schools. Instead of being places to explore various ideas or opinions, these schools become places to reproduce

accepted ideas about the world and life. The lack of meaningful diversity and the notions of Christian uniqueness present in many conservative Christian schools discourages a serious consideration of multiculturalism and diversity which are central to the values and aims of a democratic education. Yet this also tends to run counter Christian notions of hospitality and responsibility toward the stranger and neighbor.

Political Ideology and Assumptions

Hess and McAvoy (2015) have claimed that schools “are, and ought to be, political sites” (p. 4). This is the case because schools function as sites which ought to prepare students for a public life of living with other people. If all schools are political sites, then this includes conservative Christian schools as well. Political conservative ideology is another feature that is prevalent in conservative Christian schools. This may not always show up in strict political or partisan language, but it often appears in the way culture and society is discussed. As Guhin (2020) indicated in his study of two Christian schools, politics in terms of governmentality rarely came up in the classroom; however, the language of culture wars did, and this was presented through the ideology of political conservatism. These schools tend to have an assumed understanding of a common conservative ideology on issues of culture and politics.

The conservative political/cultural ideology of conservative Christian schools is seen in several ways. For example, Peshkin (1986) explained the conservative political/cultural ideology of conservative Christian schools is seen in classrooms when teachers denounce anything that sounds like a part of a progressive or liberal agenda. This includes speaking against issues of abortion or LGBT+ rights. Furthermore, Blosser (2019) recounted a conservative Christian school in a Southern state hosted a politician from the Tea Party to talk with students and hosted another conservative politician who extolled the virtues of educational vouchers. Along with this, Guhin (2020) found this conservative ideology in the words of a pastor whose church hosts a conservative Christian school, when the pastor claimed that “evangelical Christians were *definitionally* conservative” (p. 56). The ideological ethos of conservative Christians schools is political and cultural conservatism.

Along with this conservative ideology, many conservative Christian schools, despite their tendency to withdraw from society, may implicitly be supporting Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is the “ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture” (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, p. ix–x). Christian nationalism tends to be linked to political conservatism and notions that America is, or needs to be recovered as, a Christian nation. As Whitehead and Perry (2020) have pointed out, Christian nationalism “includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanctions for authoritarian control and militarism” (p. 10). These expressions of Christian nationalism can often be attempts to preserve a kind of imagined past or cultural identity that is essential to being America. With an assumed conservative ideology and commitment to Christian worldview, it is possible

that conservative Christian schools create a space for Christian nationalism through their curriculum and school culture.

From the earliest ethnographic studies of conservative Christian schools, connections between Christianity and America have been present. Rose (1988) found that in conservative Christian schools “patriotism is an integral part of their Christianity” (p. 99). Peshkin (1986) also found numerous ways conservative Christian schools worked to preserve traditional values or spoke of restoring American values. This trend remains in recent studies as well. Guhin (2020) found that many Christian teachers claimed that America was founded as a Christian nation, even if it has since ceased to function like one. Furthermore, the ACE curriculum specifically teaches America as a Christian nation as do other textbooks used in conservative Christian schools (Rose, 1986; Klein, 2021). The connections among American history, Christianity, and patriotism help perpetuate the ideology that flag and faith are intimately interwoven, and thus can be fertile soil for growing Christian nationalism. With the combination of political conservatism, the narrative of America as a Christian nation, and a patriotism devoted to these ideas, these schools can become places where Christian nationalism is tacitly taught and demonstrated.

It is important to point out that democratic education is not necessarily obstructed simply because a school has a particular political ideology. However, a problem may arise if these schools do not also help students develop the skills and dispositions necessary to engage in political conversations or when a particular political ideology is assumed to be the only possibility to hold to. Dispositions such as mutual respect, care, trust, and toleration help students not just to understand the plurality of reasonable positions but to start living with that plurality.

As has already been mentioned, schools that tend to serve families who are like-minded politically can have advantages and disadvantages for students. Conservative Christian schools should be aware of their political climate and intentionally help students navigate conversations and engagement with the assumed ideologies of these schools. This means making the implicit explicit for students and critically engaging with those taken-for-granted positions and understandings. For conservative Christian schools, this means becoming self-reflective and helping students critically examine assumptions of conservative ideology. This can help students to cultivate an understanding of alternative points of view and develop the dispositions necessary to engage in conversations aimed at understanding discovering the common good of society.

Conservative Christian Schools and Democratic Education

This analysis suggests that the arrangement and ethos of conservative Christian schools are not fully consistent with the principles of democratic education. For many, this is not surprising, as these schools were designed not for preparing students for a pluralistic democracy but for the goal of reproducing religious commitment. This would suggest that using democratic theory of education as a framework to examine these schools misses the point of what they are attempting to accomplish; however, it is by using this framework that the civic dimension of these schools is highlighted and brought to the forefront.

Despite the reality that these schools may not adopt a democratic view of education, they still play a pivotal role in preparing students for public life. Conservative Christian schools help form students as political citizens through both the explicit and implicit messages they provide about how students ought to order their world. These schools need to recognize and embrace this role of forming political citizens. This acknowledgment of playing a role in the larger public need not eliminate their commitment to religious schooling.

When it comes to civic education, conservative Christian schools need to make their political ideology explicit and engage with alternative ideologies in honest and authentic ways. This means focusing on helping student develop the skills necessary to engage in democratic conversations—skills such as toleration, trust, honesty, and care, skills that are well attested to and supported by the Christian tradition. When it comes to pluralism, these schools need to better understand the benefits they derive from being in a pluralistic society. The fact that they receive benefits from pluralism implies that they too have an interest in the health and maintenance of that pluralism which supports their very existence. Furthermore, conservative Christian schools ought to see the importance of developing autonomy in students. This can entail offering students a coherent cultural view of the world but one that works in concert with pluralism. Students need to see the diversity and reasonableness of other positions if they are to fully embrace their own tradition. The Christian tradition has long held to the importance of noncoercion, even if not always practiced, and this means these schools can help students develop the practical reason necessary to evaluate their own position and the position of others. These shifts toward acknowledging and embracing a role of forming citizens can be done without these schools losing their core commitment to Christianity.

The portrait of conservative Christian schools developed here highlights a significant concern for these schools and democracy, namely that at present many of these schools contribute to creating a social world that implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, embraces forms of Christian nationalism. Rather than being about religious piety or practice, Christian nationalism is a political ideology that “co-opts Christian language and iconography in order to cloak particular political or social ends in moral and religious symbolism” (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, p. 153). Displays of Christian nationalism, as seen during the insurrection on January 6, 2021, strain the limits of our democratic society and seek to transform the public image of Christianity into a political force committed to nativism, white supremacy, and authoritarian control. Christian nationalism places political commitment and ideology over religious practice and thus risks baptizing a political position as sanctioned by the divine and therefore no longer open to democratic dialogue concerning the common good.

Conservative Christian schools currently represent a significant portion of private schooling in the United States. Furthermore, they are positioned to grow in coming years as there is a continual push for school choice programs, they have the flexibility to completely reopen during the COVID-19 crisis, and there are growing cultural wars centered on the role of diversity and CRT in

schools across the country. The role these schools could be playing in the rise of Christian nationalism ought to be a concern for those who work and support these schools and for the public, as these schools are often supported by public money through school choice programs. Using democratic education as a framework to examine these schools helps to highlight their role in forming citizens.

References

- Accelerated Christian Education (ACE). (2021). What is pace? ACE Ministries. <https://www.aceministries.com/what-is-a-pace>.
- Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). (2020a). Statement of faith. Association of Christian Schools International. <https://www.acsi.org/about/about-the-association-of-christian-schools-international/statement-of-faith>.
- Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). (2020b). Why pursue ACSI accreditation? Association of Christian Schools International. <https://www.acsi.org/accreditation-certification/accreditation-for-schools>.
- Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). (2021). Mission & vision. <https://www.acsi.org/about/about-the-association-of-christian-schools-international/mission-and-vision>.
- Allen, D. S. (2004). *Talking to strangers: Anxieties of citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Apple, M. W. (2006). *Educating the “right” way: Markets, standards, God, and inequality*. Routledge.
- Blacker, D. (1998). Fanaticism and schooling in the democratic state. *American Journal of Education*, 106(2), 241–272.
- Blosser, A. H. (2017). Considerations for addressing diversity in Christian schools. In D. B. Hiatt (Ed.), *Family involvement in faith-based schools* (pp. 33–55). Information Age Publishing.
- Blosser, A. H. (2019). *Faith, diversity, and education: An ethnography of a conservative Christian school*. Routledge.
- Broughman, S. P., Kincel, B., & Peterson, J. (2019). Characteristics of private schools in the United States: Results from the 2017–18 private school universe survey first look. U.S. Department of Education.
- Carper, J. C., & Layman, J. (2002). Independent Christian day schools: The maturing of a movement. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 5(4), 502–514.
- Callan, E. (1997). *Creating citizens: Political education and liberal democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Cox, W. F., Hameloth, N. J., & Talbot, D. P. (2007). Biblical fidelity of Christian school textbooks. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 16(2), 181–210.
- Espinoza v. Montana Dept. of Revenue, 140 S. Ct. 2246, 207 L. Ed. 2d 679 (2020).
- Feinberg, W. (2006). *For goodness sake: Religious schools and education for democratic citizenry*. Routledge.
- Gorski, P. (2017). Why evangelicals voted for Trump: A critical cultural sociology. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 5(3), 338–354.
- Green, J. (2006). Christian-centered, diverse, and academically excellent: The origins of a possible model for Christian schooling the twenty-first century. *American Educational History Journal*, 33(1), 89–95.
- Guhin, J. (2020). *Agents of God: Boundaries and authority in Muslim and Christian schools*. Oxford University Press.
- Gutmann, A. (1995). Civic education and social diversity. *Ethics*, 105(3), 557–579.
- Gutmann, A. (1999). *Democratic education: With a new preface and epilogue*. Princeton University Press.
- Hess, D., & McAvoy, P. (2015). *The political classroom: Evidence and ethics in democratic education*. Routledge.

- Joldersma, C. W. (2016). Doing justice today: A welcoming embrace for LGBT students in Christian schools. *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 20(1), 32–48.
- Klein, R. (2021, January 15). These textbooks in thousands of K–12 schools echo Trump's talking points. *Huffington Post*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/christian-textbooks-trump-capitol-riot_n_6000bce3c5b62c0057bb711f.
- Lee, H. A. (2015). Thinking levels of questions in Christian reading textbooks. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 24(2), 89–100.
- Levinson, M. (1999). *The demands of liberal education*. Oxford University Press.
- McAvoy, P., Hess, D., & Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2014). The pedagogical challenge of teaching politics in like-minded schools. In M. Thomas & J. De Groof (Eds.) *Cross-cultural case studies of teaching controversial issues: Pathways and challenges to democratic citizenship education* (pp. 237–253). Oisterwijk.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2019). *Enrollment and percentage of distribution of students enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools, by school orientation and grade level*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_205.20.asp?current=yes.
- Nevin, D., & Bills, R. E. (1976). *The schools that fear built: Segregationist academies in the south*. Acropolis Books.
- Peshkin, A. (1986). *God's choice: The total world of a fundamentalist Christian school*. University of Chicago Press.
- Purposeful Design Publication. (2021). *Cultivating transformation through educational resources*. <https://your.acsi.org/pdp-store/Textbooks-Support>.
- Reese, W. (2007). *History, education, and the schools*. Palgrave.
- Reilly, K. (2020, August 31). Public schools will struggle even more parents move kids to private ones during the pandemic. *Time*. <https://time.com/5885106/school-reopening-coronavirus/>.
- Rose, S. D. (1988). *Keeping them out of the hands of Satan: Evangelical schooling in America*. Routledge.
- Rose, S. D. (1993). Christian fundamentalism and education in the United States. In M. E. Marty & R. S. Appleby (Eds.), *Fundamentalism and society: Reclaiming the sciences, the family, and education* (pp. 452–489). University of Chicago Press.
- Sant, E. (2019). Democratic education: A theoretical review (2006–2017). *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 655–696.
- Sikkink, D. (2018). Evangelical protestant high schools: From inner faith to community. In J. D. Hunter & R. S. Olson (Eds.), *The content of their character: Inquiries into the varieties of moral formation* (pp. 87–110). Finstock & Tew.
- Sikkink, D. (2001). Speaking in many tongues: Diversity among Christian schools. *Education Matters*, 1(2), 36–44.
- Stitzlein, S. M. (2008). Private interests, public necessity: Responding to sexism in Christian schools. *Educational Studies*, 43(1), 45–57.
- Slater, R. G. (2019). *A Christian America restored. The rise of the Evangelical Christian school movement in America 1920–1952*. Pickwick Publications.
- Smith, J. (2021). SOGI statements and LGBT+ student care in Christian schools. *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 25(3), 290–309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20569971211005487>.
- Wagner, M. B. (1990). *God's schools: Choice and compromise in American society*. Rutgers University Press.
- Wagner, M. B. (1997). Generic conservative Christianity: The demise of denominationalism in Christian schools. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(1), 36, 13–24.
- Whitehead, A. L., & Perry, S. L. (2020). *Taking America back for God: Christian nationalism in the United States*. New York.
- Zelman v. Simmons-Harris, 536 U.S. 639, 122 S. Ct. 2460, 153 L. Ed. 2d 604 (2002).