

Philosophical Inquiry in Education

PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN EDUCATION
The Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

What Is a Public Education and Why We Need It: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Self-Development, Cultural Commitment, and Public Engagement (Walter Feinberg)

Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and Robert Karaba

Volume 24, Number 1, 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070561ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070561ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Knight-Abowitz, K. & Karaba, R. (2016). Review of [What Is a Public Education and Why We Need It: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Self-Development, Cultural Commitment, and Public Engagement (Walter Feinberg)]. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 24(1), 115–119. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070561ar>

Copyright © Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and Robert Karaba, 2016

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Review of

What Is a Public Education and Why We Need It: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Self-Development, Cultural Commitment, and Public Engagement

by Walter Feinberg. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016

KATHLEEN KNIGHT ABOWITZ

Miami University

ROBERT KARABA

New Mexico Highlands University

In a year celebrating the centennial anniversary of John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, Walter Feinberg has published a book explaining and defending the public school's crucial role in reproducing a civic public within each generation. This timing brings attention to the multiple ways the text owes debt to Deweyan notions of philosophy, conceptions of self, and the uniquely public aspects of public education, while still reflecting on contemporary dilemmas and challenges faced by the defenders of public educational structures. As Feinberg's writings in educational philosophy have utilized varieties of political liberalism more than classical pragmatism, the Deweyan influences in the text are particularly noteworthy for those of us who closely follow his work.

The text reviewed is most similar to the arguments in *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities: National Unity and Cultural Difference* (2000), but instead of focusing on citizenship education, the present text's focus is broader and more ambitious. Feinberg's argument in *What Is a Public Education and Why We Need It* connects with Deweyan philosophy beyond *Democracy and Education*, in particular such works as *The School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum*. Feinberg is writing here, like Dewey did at intervals throughout his career, for a wide audience: this is a short book working to convey a sophisticated argument in an accessible way. Far more succinctly than did *Democracy and Education*, Feinberg's new book explains to lay readers why our society depends upon public education for its continuance as a democratic society. The argument unfolds from explorations of self-development in Chapter 1, to the role of self in culture, to the notion of cultural strangers so important to public spheres in Chapter 3. In Chapters 4 to 6, Feinberg turns towards values and the civic good, explaining how these are constructed and stabilized in public schools, and why this is critically and uniquely the work of public education.

Feinberg draws upon philosophy's melioristic potential—so important to Dewey's sense of the discipline's purpose—to shape an aspirational vision of public education's public mission for a broad audience. Feinberg employs what he calls "street discipline" philosophy, using philosophy as a tool to clarify concepts and give a wider vision of what educational aims can and should be in a democracy. Feinberg explicitly defines terminologies throughout, laying out the argument methodically. The strategy of street discipline philosophy engages a wider public in addressing the conflicting values of democracy and neoliberal culture in the context of the goals of a public education. Philosophy, in this text, is working to establish the seemingly lost public aims of state-supported schools. In answering what is unique to a public education, Feinberg reminds us of aims that are particular to *public* education. He focuses on the goals because, as he rightfully claims, questions of pedagogy, curriculum, teacher effectiveness, etc. all are secondary to the aims (p. 4).

Perhaps unexpectedly for a book about the public dimensions of education, the argument of the text starts with self. Feinberg unpacks the notion of education and its basic function of self-development and growth. In doing so, he reminds us of pragmatist transactional theories of self and self-development which cohere with social development. In other words, Feinberg constructs meanings of self-development and public education in which their aims support each other, and are not dichotomous but rather complementary.

Feinberg positions his overall argument of the interdependencies of self and social development with a carefully constructed sub-argument in Chapter 1. He clearly defines popular conceptions such as the "process" view of self and the "product" view of self to contrast in favor of a transactional theory emphasizing the self's intersubjectivity. Feinberg defines the "product" view of self in terms of self as an object to be acted upon; it is shaped and developed by the community and culture. He defines the "process" view of self as seeing the self as the agent of its own development. As such, "[t]he self is not simply an object. It is a stream of subjective experience and it is the responsibility of education to enable its actualization" (p. 30). Feinberg problematizes both these ontological conceptions of self: "The one—the process view—deifies the individual. The other—the product view—deifies the culture and community" (p. 33). For Feinberg, the self is neither "free floating" nor it is completely determined. Eliminating useless dualisms, Feinberg's argument begins with a pragmatist notion of self.

Although never referencing George Herbert Mead, Feinberg's theory of self and self-development clearly corresponds with his pragmatic, transactional conception. Like Mead (1934) in *Mind, Self and Society*, Feinberg seeks a middle ground between the myth of autonomy (individualism) and the nihilism of "group mind" (collectivism). He thus argues for a relational view of self "in which the identity of the self is formed through interaction and where engagement with the other is critical in a constitutive but not determinant way" (p. 34). A relational or, in Mead's language, transactional view of self recognizes the strong influence of social behaviorism yet allows for creative agency. This agency will be important, not only for self-development but, as we shall see, for social development as well.

In Chapter 2, Feinberg moves from self to culture, again working the middle ground between dualistic conceptions. Culture is the context of self-development; we build selves in cultural contexts that help us define and shape ourselves towards particular cultural ideals. Character development is the reflective, ongoing engagement with cultural ideals and our roles within these contexts. Feinberg explains that education does not simply transmit culture; "it also mediates cultural resources for the sake of growth, and part of this growth involves *self*-development" (p. 47). Continuing to push the transactional view, Feinberg's notion of culture develops a conception of public schooling that educates

with culture rather than *through* culture, to distinguish between simple cultural assimilation and socialization, and the more complex evaluative appreciations of culture developed through public education that builds critical reflection capacities.

Feinberg describes why this is such complicated work for educators who are caught between colonialist conceptions of hierarchical cultural values and “the new post-modern, normatively flattened understanding of the idea of culture” (p. 50). To point a way out of this dualism, Feinberg again channels Dewey; he makes a noun into a verb. Rather than culture becoming a “thing,” it needs to be viewed as an active process, “culture as culturing ... both preserving and reproducing symbolic forms and significations as well as introducing new symbolic forms and significations” (p. 55). It is through this process that culture can become more than just a badge of personal identity. Culture is the fabric of our development, but the self is an “irreducible element” in the educational process. Culture, for Feinberg, is a network of meanings “connected more or less to shared personal or historical experiences” (p. 58).

Starting from a transactional, social self and moving to a reflexive, process view of culture, Feinberg has set the stage for his concept of public. Feinberg attempts to capture a representative range of philosophical views on these subjects. At times in this dense work of chapter 4, the “street philosopher” meanders off the street a bit as scholars from Plato to Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Habermas all make appearances in the preliminary discussions of the public concept. Aristotle’s conception, requiring the development of rational faculties and a shared, public identity among citizens, sets the classical standard for democratic thinking, but Feinberg argues that the classical shared notions of identity are too demanding for the substantial pluralism in modern democracies. He also reviews Walter Lippman’s democratic realism and Alasdair MacIntyre’s pessimism that anything like an educated public is even possible in the postmodern landscape. Feinberg rejects both these views and attempts to “narrow the interpretive ambiguity of Dewey’s idea [of the public] and use Dewey to argue that the idea of a public education ... is an important but fragile vehicle for civic education in a democracy” (p. 69).

In the end, Feinberg’s public concept is based in the creation of public values, and deliberative in nature. He argues that his view is “more modest than consensus as Aristotle and Dewey envisaged” (p. 73). This minimum is represented in the “tolerance of tolerance” idea undergirding Feinberg’s definition of a public education: “A public education entails practices that advance the acceptance of this principle by members of different groups with different traditions so that it serves as the foundation of public discourse” (p. 73). Citizens are cultural strangers. Feinberg’s notion of culture as “process” lays the groundwork for cultural strangers to build, as citizens, shared civic cultures out of the networks of meanings available to us in our diverse traditions and practices.

In the last chapters, Feinberg carefully argues for the importance of a public education in a neoliberal world. He argues neoliberalism has corrupted Adam Smith’s ideas by extending market ideology into all reaches of public life, including education. “To the extent that Adam Smith had a philosophy of education its aims were social and moral, not financial or economic” (p. 78). Neoliberalism applied to education renders the public mission of schools unintelligible and “diminishes the commitment of individuals as members of a civic public” (p. 91). What may bind those pluralistic individuals are public values. He distinguishes “public values” from both “neighborhood” values (individually created, but shared) and “common” values, those which are shared “but without the benefit of a critical filter” (p. 86). Feinberg calls for a cultural commitment to “common values that

have been subject to critical reflection” (p. 86). This discussion logically leads to a reformulation of the task of *public* schools as recognizing and reproducing public values.

Feinberg, continuing to invoke pragmatist sensibilities, seeks a middle ground for schools between conservatively reproducing public values and seeking to create a new social order, as contemporaries like George Counts (1932/1978) famously sought. Feinberg has progressive commitments to social change that are more tempered than those of Counts or contemporary critical theorists; like Deweyan pragmatists, he seeks to introduce social change without introducing social disorder. His interest in peaceful social reproduction informs the “thinness” of his public conception (and reveals the influence of political liberalism on his thinking here, as in his past writings). Feinberg argues for the public school’s role as stabilizing public values without “fossilizing” them. In support of this point, Feinberg offers an extensive discussion in Chapter 5 on the evolution of the concept of racism as a practical and useful example of how public values evolve. Public schools “rarely lead the change,” Feinberg states, but play a vital role in critically examining the myriad forces, discursive and material, which contribute to these changes (p. 110). Unlike critical theorists, he is cautious regarding how much the public school can radically transform existing public values: “[T]he educator’s task is not to lead a vanguard into a desired future but to prepare a public that will be capable of engaging a future that cannot yet be fully comprehended” (p. 114). Unlike some pragmatist interpreters of Dewey’s public concept, he has more modest hopes for the kinds of social intelligence and communities that these deliberations may produce.

Feinberg prompts us to think about the public aspects of education, leading us to consider both what our shared values are and how we foster social growth and change in those values. He valiantly balances the tension between complexity and clarity, between addressing a wider audience, who may at times have difficulty following his foray into theories of self and self-development, and the philosopher, who may yearn for him to elaborate in more areas, such as “deep” pluralism. Yet, Feinberg succeeds in both helping the broader audience consider important, neglected meanings and aims of public education and reminding philosophers of education of the most central pragmatist arguments for an educated public and what exactly that may mean. In doing the former, he performs the public intellectuals’ job to make complex thoughts accessible to a more general audience—in this case, the important distinctions between education and schooling—without sacrificing rigor. In doing the latter, he contributes to contemporary philosophical work attempting to rearticulate and reconstruct public aims in education.

References

- Counts, G. (1978). *Dare the schools build a new social order?* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University.
(Original work published 1932)
- Feinberg, W. (2000). *Common schools/Uncommon identities: National unity and cultural difference*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

About the Authors

Kathleen Knight Abowitz teaches educational foundations, philosophy and community leadership courses in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University. She is the author, with Stephen Thompson, of *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy and Leadership* (Paradigm, 2013). Contact her at knightk2@miamioh.edu

Robert Karaba teaches in the Educational Leadership Department at New Mexico Highlands University. His most recent article, “Challenging Freedom: Neoliberalism and the Erosion of Democratic Education,” was published in *Democracy and Education*, May 2016. He can be reached at rkaraba@nmhu.edu