Philosophical Inquiry in Education, **Volume 32 (2025), No. 1, pp. 1-15**

Why Well-Being as an Educational Aim Constrains Paternalism in Schools

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In this paper, I aim to showcase and texture the reasons why children's autonomy is a topic worth revisiting in schools. I advance the premise that student autonomy is a necessary condition for well-being and argue that children's capacities for autonomy are as broad and important as adult capacities and requirements for autonomy. New understandings about the purpose of school education and what it means to be a child yield important implications for, and constraints on, adult entitlements to paternalizing children in schools. In this paper, I outline reasons why, all things considered, a soft-paternalism approach in schools promotes greater student well-being. I offer practical pathways for teachers to take a soft-paternalism approach that views children as powerful thinkers in school classrooms. The takeaway from this view is that children are entitled to determine their own learning and educational goods for well-being to a far greater degree than is currently promoted in schools.

Introduction

It is often taken for granted that adults should not be treated in the same ways as children. In fact, treating an adult like a child is oftentimes considered an insult to an adult's intellect or competence; what else could we mean when we exclaim, "don't treat me like a child!"? Children, the thinking goes, are a different class of humans, with different capabilities, entitlements, and interests. And if they are a different class of people, then a different kind of treatment must be called for. The treatment by adults toward children – that is, the ways adults acknowledge and enact children's rights or moral entitlements – has been legally, politically, and socially negotiated and influenced over time. Constraints on the power that adults can wield over children vary across contexts, but in general, adults have, even in the most child-centred contexts, a wide degree of freedom in their treatment of children. Notwithstanding reports of neglect or abuse, parents generally have latitude to make all decisions on behalf of their legal children. In schools, adults determine and enforce what students ought to learn and, with some superficial exceptions, how students go about their learning. Whether adults are consciously aware of it, their judgments on behalf of children are for the most part paternalistic actions. Adults paternalize children when they make decisions without a child's deliberate and explicit consent about their daily environment, routine, and interactions, and their physical, social, linguistic, moral, and spiritual development, just to name a few. By their very nature, schools are sites of paternalism.

In many ways and despite a plethora of related education research, the topic of what justifies the ways in which adults structure K–12 classroom environments and make decisions on behalf of children has fallen by the wayside. There is ample research on *how* educators ought to structure classrooms and schools, but rarely is there discussion about *whether* education practitioners have entitlements to structure a child's environment or learning experiences, and the trade-offs we make as a society paternalizing

children in schools. Arguments that support children's capacity to make decisions about their own learning are too often dismissed as dangerous or impractical. If children make decisions about their own learning in schools, the common sense argument goes, it creates a school environment that is "too unstructured" and "inherently unstable" (Davies & Guppy, 2018, pp. 166–167). Of course, classrooms across Canada can vary, but rows of desks facing the front are still commonplace, particularly in Grades 7 and higher; and while rows of desks in themselves probably restrict student autonomy, more significant are the social processes throughout the day that often follow the pattern of teacher-led lessons and teacher-directed options, tasks, and assessments. Given that adults structure school processes and that those processes deeply impact children's overall well-being, there is a strong argument for greater consideration about how adults paternalize children in schools. This paper is concerned with the implications to children's overall opportunities for well-being in light of the paternalism that occurs in schools. Over the past decade, there has been a greater concern for addressing student well-being in schools (for a list of examples, see Falkenberg, 2019, pp. 3–4). The promotion of well-being in K–12 school education has even become an explicit aim for school education across many provinces and school divisions (see, for example, Manitoba Education and Training, 2023), both prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and most especially in its aftermath. With this greater concern for student well-being, I think we would do well to revisit the topic of children's entitlements to autonomy in schools, since student autonomy is enmeshed with student well-being. Therefore, if we view student well-being as a core purpose for K–12 education, we require an updated approach in schools that moves beyond traditional understandings of how children ought to be treated in schools.

In this paper I advance the premise that student autonomy is a necessary condition for well-being and argue that that children's capacities for autonomy are as broad and important as adult capacities. First, I present how new understandings about the purpose of school education underscore the importance of child well-being. Next, I explore what it means to be a child and how this conceptualization yields important implications for (and constraints upon) adult entitlements to paternalize children in schools. Finally, I outline reasons why, all things considered, a soft-paternalism approach in schools promotes greater student well-being. I offer practical examples of what this might look like in classroom environments. Ultimately, I aim to texture and showcase nuanced understandings for why children's autonomy is a topic worth revisiting in schools if we care as a society about children's well-being in schools.

Traditional Aims for Education and Creating Space for Well-Being

Public schools in British colonial society between the 16th and 18th centuries, in what would become Canada, looked a little different than they do today. Students in these schools were organized based on level of knowledge or ability, and the focus was very much on the three "r's" – reading, 'ritin, and 'rithmatic – as well as on religious instruction and explicitly teaching morality as understood through a Christian framework (Davies & Guppy, 2018). At the start of the 19th century, a shift took place to grouping students based on age rather than ability, and by 1871 all children aged 7 to 12 were required to attend school for four months a year. Interestingly, by 1876, 90% of children aged 5 to 16 (that is, both younger and quite a bit older than the required ages) were registered as attending public school (Davies & Guppy, 2018). Scott Davies and Neil Guppy (2018) argue that the central reason parents would send their children to school at this time was because of perceptions about the weakness and incapacity of young people. Diane Ravitch (2008) and David Labaree (2010) argue that the origins of schools are rooted in a desire to promote nationalism and support the labour economy for industrialism, and attempts to replace previous systems of ascription, or the ways in which people acquired status. Davies and Guppy (2018) argue that some of these ends were achieved through socialization processes in schools and that schooling was and has always been about providing a certain type of moral education. Labaree (2010) offers further a compelling argument that schools today have expanded their aims to include the social

aims for solving social problems such the climate crisis, crime, and population health, while maintaining goals for creating moral or "good" citizens, a productive labour force, providing people with opportunities to succeed, and reducing inequalities. Essentially, schools both historically and today face an incommensurable tension in servicing public goods while also trying to serve private aims – that is, to help a particular child get ahead of other children.

The goals and aims for public schooling have implications for children's opportunities to exercise their autonomy in schools. If the aim of schooling is to prepare students for labour market roles, then it seems justified to limit student autonomy quite significantly – at least for a large percentage of future adults, since most will eventually find themselves in labour market roles that do not encourage or promote much autonomy. If the aim of schooling is to prepare students to become participating, democratic citizens, this becomes somewhat trickier, because students will need to learn to think critically and make decisions. However, for this aim, students must also adopt a set of common moral codes and community values. From these examples, one can see, then, how the aims for school education are tied to the promotion of autonomy in schools. Importantly, if student well-being is a core purpose for K–12 education, then we require an updated approach that moves beyond the traditional aims of strengthening our national identity, economic competitiveness, and social cohesion.

Pillars, plans, frameworks, and mission statements change with governments and social contexts. Though it is difficult to rely on stable government priorities, Manitoba currently has a *Framework for Learning* that prioritizes well-being as an educational aim. The *Framework for Learning* envisions that all Manitoba learners will succeed, no matter where they live, their background, and their individual circumstances, and states that "every child will be prepared to reach their full potential and to live 'the good life.'" The "good life" in schools, according to this framework, appears to be defined by the following list:

- have hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose.
- have a voice.
- feel safe and supported.
- are prepared for their individual path beyond graduation.
- have capacity to play an active role in shaping their future and be active citizens.
- live in relationships with others and the natural world.
- honour and respect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. (Manitoba Education and Training, 2023)

This list appears to be an operationalization of what is meant by well-being in schools. This framework and other like it have implications for how we understand student autonomy. I will return to this list and its implications for student autonomy in the next section.

If the purpose of school education is indeed to promote well-being, this raises several considerations for decision-makers (children and adults) in schools. The first consideration is how to balance the promotion of students' current well-being against that of their future selves. The second consideration is the balance between individual and collective well-being – in other words, how much emphasis is placed on attending to the well-being of individual children and how much time or emphasis is placed on moral instruction regarding the well-being of others. Each of these considerations, along with other details that need to be ironed out, requires a theory of well-being and a theory about how access to opportunities to develop and exercise autonomy are distributed in schools. Lastly, it should be noted that while private aims – that is, the aims of parents to have their child get ahead – are a zero-sum game, well-being is, at least in theory, not. All children should be able to access well-being in schools equitably across groups and schools, since there is no limitation on the number of spots available in schools for students to develop their well-being in schools. Next, let us turn to the question of defining individual well-being, and clarifying which aspects of well-being can or should be addressed in schools.

What Is Well-Being and Which Aspects Ought to Be Addressed in Schools?

Well-being is a contested concept. In Western traditions, well-being is often understood as that which is non-instrumentally or ultimately good for a person (Crisp, 2016). It is a measure of how well a person's life is going, for that person, or from the perspective of their own interests. In a taxonomy originally introduced by Derek Parfit, the three main theories of well-being may be categorized as hedonism, preference satisfaction, and objective list (see Crisp, 2016 Magnusson & Krepski, 2024; Parfit, 1986). Simply stated, *hedonic* well-being is the balance of pleasure over pain that one experiences in their life, *preference satisfaction* is the fulfilment of one's goals or preferences, and *object list* well-being is when one is in possession of some particular list of objective goods that offer well-being. A hedonic and preference satisfaction view of well-being ostensibly mean that we are motivated to maximize opportunities for autonomy – since my ability to determine or pursue what brings me pleasure or what I think will make my life feel successful will typically require self-determination. My happiness and well-being are inseparable from my "experience of personal and motivational autonomy in pursuing freely chosen life-goals, actions, and behaviors" (Chirkov et al., 2010, p. 1). One might object to the notion that happiness or well-being is best attained by individual efforts and the promotion of autonomy. Indeed, many social constructivists (see Christopher et al., 2008) argue that flourishing can only emerge from the ideology of collectivism, from the submergence of an individual into a collectivity (Chirkov et al., 2010, p. 19). This paper takes up the position articulated by Ruut Veenhoven (1991), that the overall evaluation of one's life depends also on how one feels affectively, and a hedonic level of affect draws, on its turn, on the gratification of bio-psychological needs, which exist across cultures (Veenhoven, 1991). This work rests upon the idea that well-being is attained when we can exercise our capabilities – a view that renders thinking and reflecting for oneself and acting on one's own judgments of central importance (consistent with the tradition established by Sen [2009] and Nussbaum [2011]).

However, children are often not encouraged to pursue or make choices about the goals or behaviours they believe will secure their own well-being. Adults frequently make decisions on behalf of children to (presumably) secure their future well-being (qua future adult). And in doing so, school practitioners almost certainly reduce children's hedonic well-being qua child and preference satisfaction qua child by limiting their autonomy while they are in schools. Even if they wanted to address these aspects of well-being, given the current structure, it would be difficult for school practitioners to optimize the hedonic and preference satisfaction well-being of large groups of children, each of whom have their own unique preferences and goals. Schools as complex adaptive systems do not typically acknowledge or address these two types of well-being. When well-being *is* addressed, schools instead take an objective-list approach to understanding and providing for student well-being. For example, Manitoba's *Framework for Learning* document demonstrates one of many objective-list approaches to well-being found across school systems. Objective-list approaches are popular in the field of education, and really in much of social science research on well-being. In terms of student autonomy, objective lists often contain personal autonomy as one domain among many others (e.g., Brighouse et al., 2018; Sen, 2009), but these lists do not necessarily centre autonomy in their theory of well-being. If an objective-list understanding of well-being is adopted, then school practitioners sidestep the problem of limiting hedonic and preference satisfaction. However, objective-list approaches to well-being face other serious problems.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954), Martin Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), Martha Nussbaum's list of human needs and corresponding capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011), and the Indigenous-inclusive education framework (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022) are all examples of frameworks for well-being that present an objective-list view for well-being. In early childhood and developmental studies, areas of development (physical, social, emotional, cognitive, etc.) are commonly presented as an objective set of domains with specific indicators that suggest that if a young person is attaining each indicator, they are achieving well-being, or at least avoided ill-being. However, there are some pretty serious, often overlooked issues with objective lists. Objective-list accounts for well-being are prone to arbitrariness and elitism (Magnusson & Krepski, 2024).

Arbitrariness presents a dilemma of which goods for well-being make it onto the list and how certain domains may not actually reflect what might make each individual student happy. Elitism is the issue of who gets to decide what is on the objective list of goods for well-being. Some questions we must ask of any objective list are: 1) What gets on the list? 2) How are the items on the list defined or understood by readers? 3) How are the domains or "objective" goods that make the list weighted? These questions become important if we believe that students have entitlements to autonomy and autonomous decision making regarding their own well-being.

If we apply these questions to the *Framework for Learning* (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023), as an example, one might wonder – because this list is written *by* adults *for* children – whether some domains of well-being are missing from or under/overemphasized in the list. We might also wonder what is meant by, say, student voice; and, finally, we might wonder about the weighting among different domains of well-being on the list. As with adults, it seems likely that different children have different sources for their well-being, and that, depending on their background, disposition, interests, talents, and gifts, that they will experience well-being from a different mixture of these aspects or domains of well-being. The notion of a myriad of well-being needs and preferences is in some ways related to what Patrick Tomlin (2019) refers to as a mixing-board approach to well-being, which, he argues, shifts as a we become more experienced in the world. Perhaps children's well-being is different from adult well-being in a number of ways, as with like a mixing board different dials and knobs are turned higher or lower at different stages of childhood. To get a better sense of what we mean when we speak about children's well-being, and how it might depart from adult well-being, we will need an account of what it means to be a child.

Psychological theories about human development ranging from Maslow to Jean Piaget offer linear and somewhat straightforward ways to understand children. Perhaps these kinds of theories help us adults feel secure about the mysterious humans that occupy the class we have assigned to them as children. But what if these theories are missing the majority of what it means to be a child? Importantly, we may have missed what it means for children to experience well-being as a child (for a discussion on this, see Falkenberg & Krepski, 2020). Anca Gheaus (2015, 2018a, 2018b) identifies what she calls special goods of childhood, which include engaging in world discovery, artistic creation, philosophical pursuits, imaginary play, and experimentation with one's self. In non-linear or predictable ways, children embody so many mysterious and remarkable ways of being, relating, and feeling. Gheaus argues that children only have full access to these *special goods of childhood* during childhood and these goods in particular make a distinctive and weighty contribution to their well-being. Therefore, they ought to be part of any metric of justice used when considering children. Arguably, we are making strides in this area across Canada; however, when the central focus for teachers remains to prepare students for job-ready skills or economic participation, it can be difficult to respond to the full spectrum of other educational goods for student well-being. Just as our educational aims in the 18th century were linked to how in the dominant discourse of society children were perceived as immoral and weak, the way in which we perceive children's entitlements and capabilities today will determine how we understand and promote well-being in our schools.

Children's Capabilities and How We Understand Their Well-Being

How children are viewed by adults similarly connects to the opportunities adults provide for their autonomy and opportunities for them to procure their own well-being. Naturally, it is important for any theory of children's autonomy to define both "autonomy" and "children." As a starting point, let us define autonomy using a combination of Gerald Dworkin's, Harry Brighouse's, and Joseph Raz's definitions. Autonomy may be defined as the ability to make and act on one's own decisions based on what one determines to be more valuable or less valuable for oneself (Brighouse, 2002; Dworkin, 1972; Raz, 1986). However, we need more than a rough definition of autonomy to resolve, or make progress

on, the question of whether children are capable of being provided – and should be provided – greater autonomy in schools. Similarly, and for now, we may define a child as anyone under the age of 18, acknowledging that there will be a wide range of differences between children. A 17 year old is more likely to resemble an adult than a toddler. In the case of schools, however, we are really focusing on children ages five and up. When considered separately, the definitions I have provided for "autonomy" and "children" are likely to go uncontested. But when taken together, we can see that there is plenty of room for disagreement on the question of whether children indeed are capable of – or have entitlements to – autonomy. Political campaigns and legislation across Canada, such as in Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Saskatchewan, employ rhetoric that emphasizes the importance of "parental rights," presumably minimizing the rights or autonomy of children. Currently in Saskatchewan, Bill 137 states that it is no longer mandatory for schools to use the preferred pronouns or names of a child who is under the age of 16 and that parental consent must be given to do so (Hunter, 2023). Bill 713 in New Brunswick also removed wording allowing students to participate in extracurricular activities "consistent with their gender identity (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023). In Manitoba, the former Conservative premier spoke in her political campaign about hearing "loud and clear" from parents that they were worried about losing touch with what mattered most to their kids (MacLean, 2023), but of course a pledge to increase "parent's rights" may very well undermine the ability for children to make their own decisions in schools. These are complex issues, with particular socio-historical contexts. But the notion of whether or not children are entitled to make decisions about their own lives is entangled with the way in which we understand children's capabilities.

Despite newer understandings about what it means to be a child, the view that children are not yet rational agents and therefore are not yet capable of *being* – what some people would label *authentically* autonomous – remains common. When someone says, "I felt like I was treated like a child," it usually means someone has treated them as though they were not capable of making a decision about their own well-being or in their own best interest. Tamar Schapiro (1999) advances this view about children, sometimes called the "basic view of childhood," which is grounded in the idea that children are "stuck" in the state of nature. In this view, children are seen to lack stable normative conceptions, an enduring idea about who they are and what their goals in life are or purpose in life is, and, most importantly, the critical rationality that autonomy requires (Schapiro, 1999). On the basic view of childhood, children lack the capacity to make decisions or construct claims based on normative judgments or moral principles. Children, Schapiro argues, are in a state of normative instability, while adults have a robust moral constitution and stable normative maxims, and are therefore fully autonomous (1999). But what if this view, which is quite pervasive, is wrong?

Sarah Hannan (2019) asks this very question, arguing that we should be skeptical of both these normative notions of children's capacity to act autonomously and assumptions about adult autonomy. Hannan points out that adults may be creating far too high a standard for autonomous decision making – a standard that, ironically, most adults themselves cannot live up to. The question raised by Hannan is: What level of rationality should we require to allow for autonomous decision making? In order to make and act on my own decisions, do I, as Raz (1986) suggests, need to not only make choices but use my capacity for choice to "adopt personal projects, develop relationships, and accept commitments to causes, through which my personal integrity and sense of dignity and self-respect are made concrete" (p. 154)? Or, as Robert Nozick (1993) suggests, do I need to be able to "formulate long-term plans for my life, be able to consider and decide on the basis of abstract principles or considerations I formulate to myself and limit my own behavior in accordance with some principles or picture I have of what an appropriate life is for myself and others" (p. 49)? In other words, do I really need to hold stable, enduring, normative maxims to be considered capable of autonomous decision making?

I can tell you, there are plenty of mornings when, sitting at my computer writing, I eat a large piece of cake for breakfast. Eating breakfast cake is not the only decision that is inconsistent with my goals. I cannot recount the number of times I have skipped my gym morning, impulsively purchased a new pair of shoes, treated someone I care about in ways that did not reflect my values, spoken up too much or

too little, or just generally behaved in inconsistent ways. I am very much a work in progress. Perhaps it is the case that I do in fact hold stable values, but my behaviour does not always reflect these values. Furthermore, perhaps holding stable, normative maxims that guide my life would be too narrow a way to live my life and leave me too closed off from perceiving and assessing new information that might reasonably influence my thinking and justifiably lead me to revise these maxims based on updated information. In this sense, it is easy to see why children ought to be encouraged to continuously update their values and maxims, since they are newer to the world than adults. But this process of updating their long-term plans and core principles does not necessarily preclude them from possessing the capability for autonomous decision making. As Hannan suggests, to determine whether children are empirically capable of autonomous decision making, we must settle on a normative definition of autonomy to see whether it reasonable applies to children.

If the thresholds for autonomy set up by Raz and Nozick are too stringent, or misguided, for most adults, maybe there is a way for me (as an adult) to still be considered an autonomous agent using a more realistic conception of what it means to be autonomous. For instance, if we were to adopt a normative understanding of autonomy as "the ability to continue relationships with friends and loved ones, keeping prized possessions, engage in my favourite activities, feel pleasure, feel comfortable and at ease, master new and challenging tasks, be recognized for skills and accomplishments, and avoiding significant stress and pain" (Mullin, 2014, p. 416), it seems clear that we would view most children, perhaps with the exception of infants, as being capable of acting autonomously. Whether children fit any normative definition of autonomy is an empirical question. Franco Carnevale (2021) offers empirical accounts of the moral experiences of young children, from the age of six and up, that demonstrate their strong abilities to discern and evaluate between competing values and priorities. According to Carnevale, this ability to discern and make choices demonstrates that children are capable of acting with autonomy. B.J. Casey and Kristina Caudle (2013), as well as Linda Spear (2000), find that there are only small differences in decision-making capacity among people from mid-adolescence onward. A new threshold for autonomy that is more consistent with adult capabilities but accounts for the distinct qualities of childhood (i.e., being newer to the world), in combination with further empirical research that demonstrates children's ability to act in accordance with their values, point us in the direction of broader understandings about children's capabilities and capacities for making decisions about their own well-being.

In summary, I am endorsing here the view that any sharply drawn contrast between adult rationality or capacities for autonomy, and childhood rationality or capacities for autonomy is misguided. The basic view of childhood presents a narrow valorization of rational agency and autonomy that is common in a great deal of contemporary liberal political philosophy (Macleod, 2016). An updated view of childhood that reflects both a more realistic normative conception of autonomy and updated empirical evidence understands children as capable of independent judgment, as possessing special epistemic abilities, and as capable of acting with autonomy. Old ideas about children's capacities for autonomy need to be regarded through a critical lens and updated with regard to normative understandings about the concept of autonomy, with empirical data about children's capacities, and in their corresponding praxis in schools. A strengths-based view of children's rationality yields important considerations and implications for how we paternalize children in schools.

Paternalizing Children in Schools

New understandings about the purpose of school education and what it means to be a child, I will demonstrate, yield important implications for and constraints on adult entitlements to paternalize children in schools. Let us define "paternalism" using two definitions. First, paternalism can be defined as interference with a person's liberty of action, justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values of the person concerned (Dworkin, 1972, p. 65). In other words, paternalism occurs when adults make decisions on behalf of children because they believe that

decision is in the best interests of an individual child or group of children. Jonathan Quong (2011) offers a slightly different version of paternalism, advancing that "an act is paternalistic if it is motivated by a negative judgement about another person's ability" (p. 80). It is easy to see how acts in schools fall under this definition, since school education is predicated on the idea that children will benefit from learning the curriculum as defined by provincial curricular outcomes. Shauna Shiffrin (2000) suggests that characteristic of all paternalistic acts is that the agent considers their judgment or agency to be (or likely to be), in some respect, superior to the judgment of the other person (p. 218). While in some cases teachers themselves may not hold this view in its entirety, they may still act in this way while fulfilling their role in delivering and assessing curricular knowledge. Addressing the case of schools, Johannes Giesinger (2019) identifies at least two forms of interventions, or paternalism. The first is the directive aspect, which reacts to "inappropriate behaviours." This might start with calls for silence in class and move up to harsher disciplinary measures. The second is the epistemic aspect, which "occurs when teachers communicate descriptive and normative views and expressions of what is valuable knowledge." It is this second epistemic aspect that I focus on for its relevance to children's autonomy.

As mentioned above, the central aims for school education have traditionally been to assimilate children into the social order, to maintain social cohesion, and to prepare children to occupy various social roles. Now we can see that directive paternalism in educative processes can render a deep psychological restructuring for children – often labelled "transformation." In fact, the word "transformation" is quite commonplace (and celebrated) – in curriculum documents, education research, and education books, for example. The terms "transformative pedagogy," "transformative learning," and "transformational teaching" may call up high-minded educational ideals and fond memories of influential teachers, but they simultaneously refer to a process of cognitive restructuring (Yacek, 2020). In other words, adults are making decisions that effectively change the content and patterns of thought for students. Schools are well established as sites for transformative educational processes, which includes social, cultural, and personal transformation. Enculturation processes in schools address both social and cognitive ways of thinking and being. Consciously or unconsciously, educators enact a process of habituation that "presents itself as a ritual of force and inscription" because they view it as a cultural necessity (Kennedy, 2006, p. 66). The paternalistic idea that "father knows best" has also been described as the "benevolent interference position." This position holds that overriding or interfering with a child's judgment – from nudges to manipulation – is justified because it is benevolently motivated. The benevolent interference is only coupled with a choice that is substantially non-voluntary; in other words, where choices are "as alien to [us] as the choices of someone else" (Feinberg, 1986, p. 12, as cited by Grill, 2019, p. 127).

Dworkin's liberty-limiting versions of paternalism and Quong's version about negative judgments of another person's ability to make decisions have been even further categorized. *Strong paternalists* believe that it can be legitimate to interfere with a person's ends (e.g., because they regard these ends as irrational), while a *weak paternalist* assumes that such interferences are only legitimate when they concern the means that an agent employs to achieve their ends (Drerup, 2017). *Hard paternalism* is the view that benevolent interferences into the domain of autonomous judgment or liberty of action are justified even when the person is sufficiently competent and autonomous. *Soft paternalists* only regard interventions as justified in cases in which the agent is (probably) not sufficiently competent and autonomous. If a person is wandering over an old bridge that may soon collapse (to use John Stuart Mill's famous example), a soft paternalist would try to make sure that the person actually knows about the condition of the bridge. If this is the case, a soft paternalist would not stop the person from walking over the bridge (even though doing so is imprudent and dangerous). Hard paternalists would stop the person even if they had made a sufficiently voluntary and autonomous decision; for example, perhaps they love the thrill (Drerup, 2017). Given this, if we reject the basic view of childhood, then school practitioners would find themselves in the strong and hard paternalism boxes.

K–12 public school education has generally benefitted from both hard and soft paternalist approaches. When a soft paternalism approach takes place, it generally includes the assumption that

children are not sufficiently autonomous to make decisions about their own current and future well-being. With traditional aims for education, paternalism is considered a necessary and beneficial approach in school classrooms. Alternatively, an educational approach that is concerned with well-being and that holds children to be powerful thinkers likewise requires an updated understanding of when paternalism may be justified. As I have argued, there are good reasons to extend our notions of rationality, which in turn broadens children's moral and political status beyond the *basic view* that is associated with the traditional aims for schooling. I have also outlined why I think children are capable of acting with autonomy and therefore are entitled to opportunities to exercise their autonomy.

New understandings on both childhood and the aims for schooling call for a frank conversation about the reasons for, and limits to, paternalism in schools (Birnbacher, 2015; Archard, 2015). I take the position that whether you hold an objective-list, hedonic, or preference-satisfaction view of well-being, people need some degree of autonomy and the chance to develop and exercise that autonomy if they are to have good lives. Just as individual and community well-being as an aim for education is distinct from traditional aims for schooling, promoting autonomy in schools for the sake of well-being is different from the traditional aims of producing autonomy for a civically engaged citizen or a self-supporting taxpayer. These traditional aims may be constitutive of, but in nearly all cases will not be equivalent to, student well-being. If children have access to their own rationality – that is, if they have the capability to exercise their rationality – and are capable of acting with autonomy at various points in various domains, then it follows that in many or most cases they should be able to offer or withhold their consent to (and not simply assent to) pursuing the ends and means of the schooling processes. However, as Yacek (2020) points out, a transformative experience introduces both an epistemic and a subjective discontinuity into the course of our sense of experience – and the phenomenon of epistemic discontinuity compromises our ability to cognitively stimulate, or imagine, what it would be like to undergo the experience in advance (Yacek, 2020, p. 6). To use Yacek's example, it is impossible to know what ice cream tastes like before you have the experience of eating ice cream. It is also impossible to consent to being transformed when you have no opportunity to develop an understanding of what that transformation might be like. Epistemically, transformation brings about a fundamental and enduring shift in what it is like to be ourselves, a shift that we cannot cognitively simulate beforehand and therefore cannot consent to (Yacek, 2020).

Yacek (2020) offers a way out of this moral dilemma that is consistent with a weak paternalist approach. He states that the consent can rest not upon the outcome of the transformation but rather upon the *revelatory value* of having the transformative experience, as assessed by the person who undergoes the transformation. For example, if a child wishes to find out what ice cream tastes like, then they are consenting to the experience of discovering what ice cream tastes like. In the case of ice cream, it is likely that if a student has tried frozen yogurt, they will have a good sense for whether they would like to try ice cream. Also, if the student does not like ice cream, they will not be irreversibly changed as a result of trying ice cream. The idea here is that a person is presented with the option of pursuing a revelatory experience prior to the transformation. In the case of K–12 school education, adults make decisions without a child's deliberate and explicit consent about that child's daily environment, routine, and interactions, as well as the curriculum content they learn and how they are assessed, among other things. The current non-consultative process of transformation in schools undermines children's autonomy, their opportunities to develop their capacity for making normative judgments, and their well-being qua child and qua future adult. A soft paternalist view fits well in the case of children in schools because the educative process is so often communicative and dialogical. Because of the relational nature of schools, teachers are well positioned to confer with children about their ends which supports them in their own decision making. Because different children develop different competencies at different times, educators would, in this respect, support children's well-being by exposing them to a range of possibilities and by making information available to them about the choices they face that are non-voluntary or about which they are naïve, given that children are newer to the world than adults are. This approach would also take

into consideration information that a student might seek in order to improve their well-being qua child and qua future adult.

I turn next to specific examples of what a soft-paternalism approach might look like that views children not only as capable of acting with autonomy but as having autonomy entitlements.

Practical Applications for the Current School System to Consider

Let us turn to the ways that soft paternalism might play out in an everyday schooling context. I have argued thus far that schools ought to attend to children's well-being and that children are capable of autonomous decision making. I have also argued that children's happiness and well-being are inseparable from their experience of personal and motivational autonomy in pursuing freely chosen goals and actions. In other words, exercising their autonomy in schools contributes to a child's overall well-being. I will now present what this might look like in the schooling context, given the constraints of our current school system in Canada and other similar settings.

If educators were required to obtain their students' consent prior to their undergoing a transformative experience, based on the students' anticipatory assessment of the revelatory value of that experience, teachers would have a much higher standard of consultation with students prior to subjecting them to a transformative experience. Practically speaking, this process might mean that children and educators together might map out different curricular and pedagogical plans, or transformative opportunities, for the well-being of the students. If students were viewed as being capable, autonomous decision-makers, they would also have the opportunity to lead the process of information gathering or communicative action (Habermas, 1972) prior to undergoing a transformative experience. Habermas defines communicative action as happening "wherever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching mutual understanding" (Habermas, 1984, p. 286). In being able to engage in discourse with educators, students can identify, agree on, and hopefully realize their interests and goods for well-being (Fleming & Murphy, 2010). A more process-based, dialogical, and student-led approach toward learning and communication in classrooms disrupts power hierarchies and creates space for student autonomy. Students would be given the opportunity to exercise and develop their autonomy through the process of making and acting on their decisions regarding their learning process and transformation. A soft-paternalist approach that considers children as being capable of autonomy requires that educators only assist students in the process of sifting through which *means* (i.e., how to go about their learning or revelatory experiences) might best offer opportunities for them to experience well-being.

I offer four examples to demonstrate some possibilities for a weak-paternalist pedagogical approach, given the current school curriculum and schooling models. Of course, this view of student's autonomy for their well-being can have implications beyond classroom approaches, and I hope to extend this work to broader systems beyond everyday classroom pedagogical approaches. However, given that so many children are currently enrolled in K–12 public schools across Canada and beyond that are unlikely to change their pedagogical approaches substantially any time soon, this seems to be a good place to start.

Imagine that Paris is a student who speaks only English and is taking Grade 8 French, and has an educational goal of learning how to speak French fluently by the end of the year. Perhaps Paris wishes to learn French both because she enjoys learning the language and for the sake of her well-being qua future adult (maybe she aspires to live in Paris one day, and for that she understands that she needs to speak French). Paris wants to dedicate her class time and any other free time she has toward this goal. Paris's French teacher might have several conversations with her about the conditions for learning how to become fluent in a second language. They might look up information together about the amount of time it typically takes to learn a new language, the optimal conditions under which to learn a new language, opportunities to speak that language once it has been acquired, etc. After Paris has more information

about the processes involved in learning a new language, she may decide to abandon that goal altogether, or she may revise her goal from one year to seven years. In the short term, she might formulate a new goal – for instance, to apply for a student exchange program to Quebec. In this example, Paris was offered the opportunity to explore her goal, research the means to achieve her goal alongside her teacher, and revise her goal based on what she believed to be doable and worthwhile.

Let us imagine another Grade 8 student, named Ayrton, who is not terribly interested in any of his core curricular classes. Ayrton is interested in solving Rubik's Cubes. In a soft-paternalist classroom that views children as powerful thinkers capable of autonomy, Ayrton's teacher might offer him the opportunity to do a project on Rubik's Cubes for his social studies class. Ayrton is asked to fill out a template that will connect his project to the social studies curricular outcomes. Throughout his project plan, he addresses how his project will cover the history of toy and puzzle invention, the process involved in problem solving for a special object like the Rubik's Cube, and potential applications to mathematical thinking and coding. After drafting his project plan, Ayrton executes the planned project while also including a component that documents his own Rubik's Cube training so that he can simultaneously work toward his goal of making it to the world championships of cubing. A weak paternalism would not prevent the student from pursuing such aims.

A third example – and likely the one that will strike to the heart of most objections to this approach – is a fictitious Grade 11 student named Petal who, in her technology class, wishes to pursue a project about assault rifles, rather than the standard project about carpentry. Let us say further that this student shows antisocial behaviours, speaks about white supremacy, and comes from what we suspect is a politically "alt-right" community. A weak paternalism must accept the cost of a student choosing their own ends, whatever those ends may be. However, this approach does not abandon the social, political, and legal constraints of our society. Just like the means of learning a new language and Rubik's cubing were explored by the other students, so too would the educator engage this student in ongoing conversations about the legal, social, and political implications and constraints for firearms. This student would be exposed to knowledge and understandings that might perpetuate and/or disrupt their beliefs in the context of an environment that supports their interests, evolving identity, and well-being. In her research, Petal is likely to discuss with her peers and teachers about the things she is learning, which will help her process the information she collects and make sense of it. If after high school, Petal uses this information to build a firearm for illegal purposes, can a soft-paternalist schooling approach be to blame? One might intuitively answer, yes. On the other hand, we might consider the benefits of promoting opportunities for Petal to pursue and discuss her interests within the school community as an opportunity for her to experience well-being, not only because of the focus of her project but because of opportunities for her to share that interest among peers and teachers, which would contribute to her feelings of belonging, acceptance, and community.

One final example might demonstrate the ways in which promoting autonomy can, perhaps counterintuitively, strengthen community connection, feelings of belonging, and well-being. Cliff is a third-grade student who wishes to use his English language arts class time to learn about creation stories from Indigenous storytellers rather than learn how to read the texts his teacher has selected. Since a very young age, Cliff has enjoyed any chance he could get to spend time with an Elder in his mother's community, and he has fond memories of viewing and hearing about the Elder's artwork that represents his heritage. A weak paternalism might lead Cliff's teacher to try their best to provide creation stories that are meaningful to Cliff. His teacher might also extend this opportunity by learning, alongside the student, more about legal, social, and political implications and constraints for learning about the student's Indigenous background. This brief example gestures beyond simple cultural responsivity. Rather, it is grounded in Cliff's entitlements to autonomously choose his learning pathway in English language arts based on a personal desire to learn more about something that he feels connected to, which in turn will likely strengthen opportunities for him to connect with the Elder in his mother's community.

As I have shown, there are good reasons to think that children are capable of autonomy. Therefore, under a soft-paternalist approach that views children as rational, capable agents, children would

experience fewer directive interventions in the classroom, while teachers would still have enough room to cover curricular outcomes. There will be differences across classroom contexts with this textured approach, which can also be thought of like an audio mixing deck, depending on the subject area, student population, age, and competencies of each student. Educators must exercise their professional judgment to determine the ways in which a soft approach might be suitable, depending on the student. However, it is important to distinguish between a soft-paternalism and a transformative-schooling approach, because the latter is typically carried out in a non-consultative fashion, without a student's awareness or consent for either the means or the ends of transformation. A soft-paternalist approach in schooling for student well-being might strike the most optimal balance between recognizing children as autonomous agents with full moral and political status and educating for well-being, whichever theory of well-being one holds. A soft paternalism does not coerce, direct, or attempt to transform students without their consent, but rather, it offers opportunities for children to develop their capabilities and acquire and use information that they may otherwise be unaware of by virtue of being newer to the world than the educating adult.

I wish to present a view that can be operational under non-ideal conditions. If school educators wish to take a soft-paternalist approach under the current slow-to-shift landscape, some general characteristics should emerge. First, students could expect that their time in school would facilitate the expression of their capabilities as autonomous agents, allowing them to address their needs for well-being. Students would be given greater opportunities to make choices about their ends and means wherever possible. Second, it would no longer be taken for granted that adult judgments are more rational and always superior when it comes to a child's well-being. The role of the educator on this view includes ways to prioritize students' well-being. One way to do this is to support the conditions and means for students to achieve their ends. Part of this is consistent with the literature on autonomy-supportive environments (Hui & Tsang, 2012; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010), in which autonomy entitlements in schools take priority. Notably, teachers who are autonomy supportive also have a greater sense of personal achievement, a greater sense of satisfaction regarding their psychological needs and well-being, and less emotional strain (Hui & Tsang, 2012, p. 5). Next, the structure of schools might be reimaged as places for children to intermingle and select the pathways for their own education. Like the mixing deck, some students may choose to "turn up" their opportunities for personal fulfillment, while others may choose to focus on economic productivity or citizenship. Long-term reimagining might allow for teenagers to have access to free play and for seven year olds to have access to car mechanics. Students would be able to discern and govern how they access goods for their well-being, with the caring support of educators. A soft form of paternalism could exist on a spectrum anywhere from modifications to the current structures, to allowing for more self-governing, to no schooling (Riley, 2020) or a free schooling model (Gray, 2014). Wherever they land on the spectrum, a soft-paternal view holds that teachers should listen to their students' perspectives about their own learning (Hui & Tsang, 2012).

Because of the differences between children, and between children and adults, I propose some notable exceptions to the soft view of paternalism in schools. There are cases in which hard paternalism could be necessary or justified, typically in the cases of very young school-aged children. Hard paternalism might be appropriate, for instance, when educators are protecting the security or basic welfare for children, both as children and qua future adults. In these cases, providing protection would help prevent the student or others from suffering substantial physical harm, or to avoid high-risk outcomes. Examples might include insisting on helmet safety, running fire drills, and maintaining schoolyard boundaries, as opposed to an approach that allows, for example, wearing hats in the classroom or running in the hallway. I ground this in the idea of retrospective consent (Clayton, 2012), which is they idea that children, after they have grown up, are likely to thank adults for having used such forms of hard paternalism to ensure their health, safety, and life. One other justified form of hard paternalism in schools is to protect the nurturing of children-as-children, in order to prevent substantial psychological and emotional harm. Examples might include preventing persistent or significant acts of bullying, as opposed to letting children learn to cope on their own with aggression directed at themselves and others. I also ground these

exceptions in a child's entitlement to enjoy well-being qua child. These exceptions require professional judgment about high-risk harms; that is, harms that have high stakes (for a discussion on these harms, see Swift, 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued for a shift that includes broader opportunities for children to exercise their autonomy in schools. Granting more autonomy to children in schools might be troubling to those who worry it will compromise children's well-being qua future adult or the sake of their well-being qua child. One might also worry that it could compromise the well-being of society in some way. The former concern might be sufficiently addressed if we view children as powerful thinkers capable of setting goals, as is argued here. The latter is a question I did not address here, since it leaves unresolved the significance of student well-being and where it falls among other aims for education. This paper addresses the importance of and rationale for the promotion of autonomy to improve student well-being. Implementing this view can look differently depending on the readiness and resources of each school or classroom. The takeaway from this view is that children are entitled to determine their own learning and educational goods for well-being to a far greater degree than is currently promoted in schools. This position contributes to the existing literature on student well-being and student autonomy. I will end with a compelling thought from Hannan (2019), which is that we have certainly got autonomy capacities wrong in the past, viewing women for instance, as incapable of autonomy. And so, as she suggests, we should err on the side of greater autonomy for children.

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