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Moral Considerations Regarding the Arizona Tax Credit Law: Some Comments

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Abstract

I begin by commenting on the language used, both by the Arizona tax credit law, and by our commentators, and then turn to a discussion of a factor I believe fuels the impetus for sectarian education. I end with a consideration of questions related to the social, cognitive, and moral costs of such privatization, in contrast to a democratic commitment to education.

This article is one of four on the Arizona Tax Credit Law:

- [Welner: Taxing the Establishment Clause](#)
- [Moses: Hidden Considerations of Justice](#)
- [Wilson: Effects on Funding Equity](#)

Language

Language can mask, or be used to deconstruct, purpose and motive. George Orwell's speaks about the importance of clear expression in *Politics and the English Language*

(1946/1981):

Now it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. (pp. 156-57)

Orwell was writing in a different time, but his words apply in many instances today. I hear Orwell when I read about the Arizona tax credit law discussed by Welner, Moses and Wilson. Our authors claim that deception through the use of language has occurred in this issue. The very title of the session at which the papers were originally delivered suggests such linguistic deception. To don a costume, we all know, is to dress up better or differently than we really are.

What kind of costume do our authors tell us that vouchers wear? The term proposed is a "scholarship," implying that academic merit is rewarded and inequity redressed. However, as Welner points out, this is not the case. Our authors claim that more likely terms for the Arizona tax credit law are vouchers, tax credits, and so forth. Indeed the language of "scholarship" is used to manipulate sentiments toward more lofty goals than mere personal gain. Wilson concludes that these scholarships are tax credits, while Moses more bluntly calls this usage a deception.

The Move to Sectarian Education

Such use of language masks an important issue that give impetus for this kind of law. The papers all talk about how religious schools are disproportionately represented in the funding. There is a deeper motivation for such that is not sufficiently discussed in the public debate in Arizona. Why are religious schools chosen overwhelmingly by these parents? What do some parents believe they are not getting from public education that makes them want to opt for this kind of instructional environment for their children? Warren Nord (1990, 1995) has written on the absence of the study of religion in public schools. He has criticized this lack on curricular grounds, in that religion can explain a great deal about history and other aspects of culture. When a religious explanation for certain events or theories is absent, Nord argues, that event or theory is meaningless.

Unfortunately, a discussion of religion in the public schools brings up many knee jerk responses, and a worry about indoctrination rather than education. This kind of reaction is understandable, however, it confuses the *study* of religion with its *practice*. Certainly this is a fine line, but a line that must be treaded in our public schools, and I believe that it is compatible with a democratic view of education.

Leaving out a religious explanation for many phenomena, such as the birth of mathematics, the Crusades, the motivation of a Thomas More, the theories of Copernicus, and so forth, can be criticized on curricular grounds. If religion is left out as a *curricular element*, the student gets an impoverished and incomplete view of how certain events in history came about, as well as the genesis and rationale of certain

scientific theories that ground much of the curriculum. I would argue that missing the element of the study of religion in our curricula might contribute to the choice of private, sectarian education by some parents.

However, my advocacy of an element of the study of religion in the curriculum may not satisfy all. Many families choose sectarian education because of a lack of perceived order and authority in public schools (usually such parents, in my experience, especially complain about profanity). In doing so, they move more toward what has been called a "lifestyle enclave" (Bellah et. al, 1985/1986, p. 335) where an aspect of private life is shared, and consequently, the benefits of a democratic and diverse way of life diminished.

Retreat from Democracy

Let us look at some other items that can be seen through the lens of the retreat from the public and the publicly supported that the Arizona tax credit law permits. Perhaps most distressing to an educator is the learning theory that supports this movement. There is a retreat from a Deweyan learning from others who are different, to a kind of learning within what I termed above a lifestyle enclave. There are benefits from open dialogue. As Dewey pointed out, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916/1989, p. 93). One learns from the other, and with learning comes growth.

The notion of freedom that underlies the movement toward sectarian and privatized education is also distressing. As Moses points out, the move to privatization contrasts the clash of individual, atomized, freedom, (her apt phrase is "the politics of disconnected freedom"), to the more fragile notion of contextual, participatory freedom. Our authors point out that similarly, justice takes a back seat in these arrangements too. Democracy is cumbersome and in a sense bothersome, but the alternative leaves out, and leaves behind, too many students and families, as well as offering the chosen families and students a narrow education.

Markets and Education

Sergiovanni (2000) reminds us of the difference between markets and education:

In markets, individuals, motivated by self-interest, act alone in making preferred choices. Democratic choice, by contrast, is collective, complex, cumbersome, time- consuming, and sometimes combative. Further, and unlike market choices where the will of the majority is not supposed to be imposed on everyone, once a democratic decision is made it applies to everyone. (p. 163)

Efficiency does not equal or even lead to equality. Moses makes a convincing argument in contrasting the libertarian market determined, efficient conception with the liberal democratic, participatory conception. Is the improvement of education best served by the market, or by other forces? Is it a question of money and power, or schooling and justice?

Concluding thoughts

In sum, I am of at least two minds about these issues surrounding the Arizona tax credit law. I look toward democratic participation as essential in schooling. Yet, I want to keep in mind the existential needs seemingly expressed by these parents regarding the need for sectarian education. I believe many of their concerns could be addressed with a robust and critical curriculum that takes into account the role of religion in culture. Since our authors are discussing an issue that is very much alive in Arizona, and in other parts of the country as well, I think it is urgent that we all ask what kinds of action are best suited to bring about and enhance a participatory and democratic ideal. I join many others in being prepared to defend this ideal on moral, and cognitive, grounds.

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