Producing Islands of Self-Mastery: The Biopolitics of Self-Determination in Special Education

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Introduction

Special education places a premium on teaching self-determination to special needs students. In this essay, I explore the philosophical history as to why self-determination carries such influence. I locate the genealogy of self-determination in John Locke's conception of the body as property.[1] In addition, as an explanation to why this happened, I turn to Michel Foucault's conception of "governmentality" and its role in education with respect to self-determination as a mode of control.[2] Next, I discuss the deleterious consequences of this idealization of self-determination that obscures the interdependent nature of all persons, putatively disabled or not. One chief consequence is the portrayal of dependence as a pejorative state of affairs that makes dependent individuals appear dangerous. I augment my reading of Foucault with Roberto Esposito's "paradigm of immunization," in which persons are "immunized" against obligation towards others beyond contractual arrangements.[3] The paradigm for contractual relations arises from a neoliberal view of the market as the protector of freedom and self-sovereignty. Consequently, the driving force behind special education and self-determination, as a strategy of empowerment, is for special needs students to take their place in the market. Special educator Michael Wehmeyer's attempt to clarify the meaning of self-determination in the context of a "causal agency theory" still promulgates a view of agency that underemphasizes its communal roots.[4] In conclusion, I propose John Dewy as a needed corrective for valorizing agency as a function of community.[5] Hence, a curriculum for self-determination for special needs students would no longer require an erasure of the reality of the interdependence of all persons.

Self-Determination: A Mantra

Drawing upon the literature of psychology and motivational theory, special education teacher textbooks promote self-determination as a unifying theme and pedagogical mantra.[6] Indeed, the concept of self-determination intuitively resonates with goals to enfranchise students with disabilities into the educational mainstream. Despite genuine intentions of educators who champion self-determination to empower students with disabilities, particularly students with learning or intellectual disabilities, the conceptions of normality that self-determination promotes bolster social constructions of disability as a diminishment to be repaired. To establish a context for analysis, I refer to a definition of self-determination drawn from *A Practical Guide to Teaching Self-Determination* by Sharon Field, Jim Martin, Robert Miller, Michael Ward, and Michael Wehmeyer.[7]

> Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes,

> individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults.[8]

Many assumptions inhere in this definition, including beliefs that if persons are successful, they are *autonomous* — as persons who set their own goals and regulate their own behavior. Much of the focus of special education research on self-determination concerns transition planning for students following secondary schooling. The federal mandate for transition planning is legislatively institutionalized in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA (reauthorized in 2004), which requires individualized education plan (IEP) teams to develop transition goals by the time a special needs student reaches the age of sixteen. (IEPs summarize annual educational goals and objectives for the students concerned). The objectives of self-determination curricula require that students exhibit behaviors believed to demonstrate *self-determining* behavior. A proliferation of assessment techniques and measures exist to determine to what degree a student is "self-determining."[9] Research articles cite measurement examples that include quantifying how often a student speaks at his or her IEP meeting, or to what extent students can explain the IEP process, or recite their transition goals or request feedback from others.[10] Hence, the annual IEP meeting is viewed as a fertile opportunity for teaching and testing self-determination skills.[11]

Considerable attention is given to self-determination in the professional special education literature.[12] Making decisions concerning one's future, immediate and longer term, provides examples of self-determining behavior. To be self-determining is to act volitionally without undue constraints imposed by others, which in neoliberal discourse is paradigmatically symbolized by an amorphous construct of the state, the vestigial remnants of monarchy, abrogating the juridical capacities of a person. Self-determination is coterminous with control over one's life, becoming and being regarded as the "captain of one's ship." The corollary, assumed more often than explicitly stated, is that one is not overly dependent on others. To be free of constraints from others requires that one be autonomous in one's decision-making activities. What constitutes "overdependence," itself difficult to define, draws connotative significance from Enlightenment conceptions of personhood and agency. Students with disabilities are the boundary cases for those touting independence and access to the social and economic goods of society. The price of admission, however, is that students with disabilities find ways, with the aid of educators, to erase their dependence on others.

Self-Determination, Inclusion, and Market Metanarrative

One of the goals of self-determination is to promote the abilities of students with disabilities to exercise decision-making skills thought necessary for market citizenship. Efforts in this direction are framed in terms of enhancing a student's capabilities to exercise volition based on the development of a dispositional stance where one views oneself as competent and effective. Self-determination is theoretically linked with calls for the full inclusion of students with disabilities even as self-determination and inclusion are frequently treated separately as research questions in the literature. In a comparison of two assessment instruments thought to measure

self-determining behavior, Karrie Shogren et al. define the components of a functional construct of self-determination as having the following, "choice-making skills, decision-making skills, problem solving skills, goal setting and attainment skills, self-monitoring skills, self-advocacy skills, an *internal locus of control*, perceptions of self-efficacy, and outcome expectancy, self-awareness, and self-knowledge."[13] While arguably all the components of self-determination named have a role in psychological health, those enumerated are heavily biased towards a self-contained juridical view of what it means to be a fully actualized human being in the market economy.

It is the argument of this essay that self-determination as promulgated in the literature and, more importantly, in practice never challenges the metanarrative of the neoliberal market economy. Indeed, the narrow enclosing of education within a skill set that atomizes individuals as discrete actors fits well a discourse that privileges education as aimed at giving students a competitive advantage in a market economy. As a historical precedent for enfranchising students with disabilities, the civil rights movement placed great effort into leveling the playing field, without changing the rules of the game. The conflation of freedom and the market encourages views that one's achievement lies within the purview of one's own effort, which needless to say, reinforces a pejorative view of disability. Therefore, the focus of special education is to provide students with skills that thwart any appearance of dependence. Just as the center of gravity for education in general has moved from a broad acquaintance with knowledge and experience (a classic liberal arts view of education for the purpose of citizen democracy) to an instrumental view (worker/consumer), so has special education. Essential life skills are conceptualized as abilities to market one's self as a commodity in the employment market. The complex interplay of conceptions that mask coercion will be the theme of the next section of this essay.

Biopolitics, Philosophy, and Self-determination

In recent years, disability studies scholars have drawn on the work of Michel Foucault to theorize disability in light of Foucault's conceptions of "biopower" (that is, power over life) and "biopolitics."[14] In brief, Foucault defined "biopolitics" as a technology of "rational governance" in the management of human beings.[15] In *Discipline and Punish* (predating Foucault's published writings on biopolitics in 1978) Foucault explicates power in terms of shifting paradigms of sovereignty.[16] To make this argument, Foucault analyzes the functions of punishment to demonstrate the machinations of social control in an analysis with wider analytic applicability to other institutions such as education. Under a framework of monarchy, power was invested in the person of the monarch as the preeminent signifier of social control and order. Threats against the monarch were interpreted as a breach in the maintenance of society, requiring a visible external application of force against those who represented a threat to the body/monarch/society. With the dispersal of sovereignty from the body of the monarch into multiple institutions of governance, the application of forces of control become more efficient and invisible as the sites of control are localized and internalized. Power in a Foucauldian sense is never

straightforwardly repressive, but rather *productive* of certain kinds of relationships between and among individuals. Thus, Foucault examines the productive capacities in the dynamics of power and knowledge, where knowledge produces power through the activities of specialists. Foucault claimed his central concern was never an explication of power per se, but how individuals came to view themselves as they do.[17] As a starting point for inquiry, Foucault argues that one begins not with the "internal rationality" of power, where one defines power as an attribute of an individual or an institution, but rather as a field of relations uncovered through an explication of its effects. Hence, using education as an example, one would not begin with reading a school's mission statement, but rather studying the effects of the methodologies employed on the students.

The Biopolitics of Immunity

Utilizing Foucault's descriptions of power, I hope to underscore how the constructs of freedom and autonomy (and by extension self-determination) actually rely on coercion to produce putatively "free" and "autonomous" individuals. Based on Foucault's conception of power ("power as an ensemble of actions"), individuals are the "effects" or the consequences of institutional arrangements. As mentioned earlier, the self-determination literature emphasizes how strategies intended to enhance self-determining behavior are psychologically healthy for individuals. Viewed, however, through a Foucauldian lens, the discourse of self-determination speaks to the "psychological health" of the body politic. In other words, what is good for the state is good for the individual where preservation of the state and the individual are conflated. In a condition of inequality between individuals where difference means danger, following the logic of Foucault's analysis, the biopower of the state actualizes machinations of biopolitics in order to maintain social order. From a Foucauldian perspective, rationality and efficiency become driving forces in the dispersion of power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that this internalization of control from an external source, i.e., the monarch, into the "soul" of the individual, results in a much more efficient deployment of power to maintain the body politic.[18] What concerns Foucault is the manner in which autonomy and self-maintenance actually become modes of self-surveillance actualized on behalf of the state. Individuals who view themselves as independent and responsible are more easily manageable than, perhaps, individuals who see themselves as dependent and oppressed. Understood in this way, self-determination becomes a means not to democratize, but instead a mechanism of social regulation. Believing one is free with an array of options (that one is the captain of one's ship so to speak) obscures the interdependencies that allow one to function and even flourish.

To augment this Foucauldian reading of education in general, and special education in particular, I refer to Roberto Esposito's work. Most recently in *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, but in other places as well, Esposito describes the "paradigm of immunity" to interpret the epistemological and moral–ethical axis of the neoliberal worldview.[19] "Immunization" in the medical lexicon refers to a process of protecting life from a contagion. With the Enlightenment shift of epistemological and moral authority from the sovereign to the individual, the

individual came to be seen as the locus of natural rights endowed by a Creator God. To be free, that is, immune, to the intrusions of the monarch meant more than the inviolability of the body; it meant also possession of the labor of one's body. As Locke wrote of the relations of property, labor, and the body, "He by his own labor does, as it were, *enclose* [italics added] it from the common.…God and his reason commanded [man] to subdue the earth, improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay something out that was his own labor."[20]

Several consequences of Locke's views of labor, property, and the body require mention. First, the world given "in common" exists to be parceled into discrete domains of individual ownership. Second, relations between individuals are atomized along the lines of "entrepreneurial selves" whose obligations to each other are fixed and limited. Third, body, labor, and property, are all conflated and reified, thus becoming coextensive with the perpetuation of life itself. The province of the entrepreneurial self, of course, did not extend beyond white European males — excluding all nonwhite races, all women, and all those with disabilities of either sex. Integral to an entrepreneurial view of the self is also a juridical conception of the individual who "self-determines" his or her boundaries vis-à-vis others, who are regarded as similarly situated, unless contravened by convention (for example, gender) or a true lack of capacity (severe cognitive disability). Such a view stipulates selves without putative juridical capacities as "creatures" to be isolated, pitied, or worse, as fertile carriers of social and biological contagion.

Esposito's conception of "immunization" deconstructs the contractual view of relations characterizing neoliberal society, and how these relations become demarcated to limit obligation, ensuring that one only has responsibility for one's own integrity; and, conversely, one bears no responsibility towards others beyond the "voluntary" contractual relations established. Dependence was strictly regulated through models of fixed reciprocity and through conceptions separating the deserving from the undeserving, often ignoring real interdependencies or the social construction of power relations. This separation of individuals into atomistic actors had profound implications for the meaning of community. Central to Esposito's argument is his etymological deconstruction of the word "community" or the Latin, "communitas."[21] Community is currently understood as a gathering of those who have something in common; however, the original meaning of the word included richer, more nuanced connotations. According to Esposito, *communitas* combines concepts of *munus*, which meant "office" or "obligation," and *donum*, which meant "gift." Moreover, in Esposito's reading of the etymological origins of *communitas* is the sense that this "gift" is circulated from person to person. Thus, a *communitas* or community in its original sense meant the "infinite obligation" of each person for each person, with all being responsible for communal sharing.[22] "Immunization" or *immuntas* is the corrective that prevents the obligations of *communitas* from overwhelming the boundaries of the individual.[23]However, the breach by others came to signify taking away something from its rightful possessor, disrupting the careful demarcations that pertain to discrete individuals. Increasingly, community was no longer a cohesive social unit but a collection of discrete individuals whose

interests lie in competition. Taking Esposito as a kind of interpretative key for Foucault's theory of productive disciplinary practices, my intention is to raise philosophical questions about the potential immunizing (that is, immunization against obligation) role of self-determination discourses, illustrating ways in which dependence is distanced from normality.

Education consequently promotes a particular vision of productivity by creating subjects who are *productive* in their entrepreneurial relations with others. In order for this to occur, individuals must interpret their relations with others through a market view of production and consumption. Individuals are "immunized," to use Esposito's conception, against responsibilities for others unless they are enacted through a contractual view of relationships. Measures of productivity include the capacity to make choices, which are then interpreted as evidence of self-determination. Neoliberalism (vs. classical liberalism) is distinguished by the shift from labor to consumption as *sine qua non* of autonomy and self-determining behavior.

Agency and Soft Determinism

In an article entitled "Beyond Self-Determination: Causal Agency Theory," Wehmeyer (a co-author of the definition of self-determination cited from *A Practical Guide*) asks whether self-determination requires clarification.[24] Wehmeyer writes, "[T] he term [self-determination] has become laden with multiple meanings that have resulted in confusion and misunderstanding as frequently as clarity and utility."[25] To resolve these interpretative difficulties, but retain the core of the definition of self-determination cited at the outset of this essay, Wehmeyer proposes "Causal Agency Theory," which he traces to what he calls the "soft determinism" of Locke's interpretation of free will and volition. Wehmeyer traces the concept of self-determination through philosophical, historical, and social scientific contexts, concluding that properly conceived agency takes into account "causal" and "agentic" capabilities in environments of "opportunity" and "threat." Wehmeyer argues that to be self-determined, "[requires acting] as the primary casual agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding the quality of one's life free from undue external influence and interference."[26]

It is noteworthy that Wehmeyer's reconception of agency is almost entirely founded on a negative framing of freedom, where freedom is not understood as a co-constructive flourishing, but rather, on one's ability to ward off the interference of others in the elaboration of the self as a "self-determining" project. One consequence is to force people with disabilities to be like everyone else and deny the reality of their experience. Again, returning to Esposito's "paradigm of immunization," I refer to his etymological analytic of the concept of "liberty," which he takes through its Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, German, and English cognates, illustrating common roots between "liberty," "freedom," and "friendship." As a result, Esposito concludes "we…deduce not only a confirmation of this original affirmative connotation: [but also, that] the concept of liberty, in its germinal nucleus, alludes to a connective power that…grows to a deployment that unites its members in a shared dimension."[27] Giving critical emphasis to "self-caused" events as opposed to "other-caused events," Wehmeyer never makes a communal connection.[28] While, no doubt,

the features of agency, as Wehmeyer frames them, contribute to a sense of efficacy and motivation on the part of the individual, all of these features remain socially constructed and actualized in a web of relationships. If self-determination or causal agency theory is to become a meaningful construct of empowerment, then the question arises: What spaces of resistance for teachers (or students) would they allow? And, alternatively, how do they valorize relationships that are materially inequitable in terms of what one can produce or what one needs to survive? Is charity the unspoken interval that permits a self-determination curriculum for all special education students? No matter how self-determination is conceptualized as intrinsically valuable psychologically for the individual, the possessors of a range of agentic capabilities (if one accepts Wehmeyer's definition of self-caused events) have to be valued on some other basis beyond what individuals can do for themselves.

On its face, the addition of self-determination to special education curricula speaks to a genuine desire to empower groups of individuals traditionally excluded from schools and society. To equate proponents and practitioners of self-determination with coercive forms of social control seems egregiously unfair. However, one must recall that Foucault's concern lay not with the intentions of individuals, or even the capacities of individuals qua individuals to rule over others, but rather the manner in which a field of actions is defined and dispersed. That Foucault's explication of the construction of subjects and subjectivities provides useful heuristic tools to consider special education in ways seldom considered does not mean that Foucault's work is a satisfactory place to rest inquiry. Critics of Foucault argue that his conceptions of power foreclose agency and potentialities to resist coercive forces. In response, Foucault argued that "where there is power, there is resistance," and, in fact, resistance is integral to the complex distributions of power.[29] Putting to rest criticisms of Foucault's conception of power is beyond the scope of this essay; however, Foucault's analysis of power affords a tool for consciousness raising that can provoke and inspire educators to rethink what they do, and conceptualize practices in the larger context of their consequences.

Conclusion

As a much-needed corrective to a conception of "self-caused agency," Dewey's emphasis on the environmentally enveloped "live creature" is a helpful theoretical insight to broaden an understanding of agency. Dewey writes, "Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication."[30] The organism's maintenance of its own homeostatic state is a crucial perpetuating event but not one that is, strictly speaking, self-caused. Not only is Dewey's definition of experience rich in its biologic implications at the level of the organism, it is rich in its potential to invite consideration of the qualities of social relations that in fact sustain agency. The sharing of experience is itself a critical component of agency that cannot be divorced from its social context. As Dewey so eloquently describes in *Art As Experience*, even functions of reason rest on an affective base that imbues and intensifies the moments of experience giving life an aesthetic richness that is inherently social.[31] Democracy is more than a form

of governance. Indeed, democracy carries with it aesthetic implications in the formation of communal interests that cannot be based on what one can do for oneself. In Esposito's deconstruction of *communitas*, the gift of community is communal experience that derives its moral significance from concern for the well-being of each member.

There is also the need to protect the integrity of those who are in immediate relationship with those whose needs are great, to provide for them and share in the support of the most vulnerable. Such pragmatic questions for society are also moral questions for education to demonstrate that the gift of community is not a possession in the material sense of the word, but an obligation that binds. The potential misnomer of self-determination is concealment of co-agency, because in the final analysis from a moral perspective, what counts is not we can do for ourselves, but what we can do with the help of others. The dangers of self-determination discourses as a form of governmentality arise from a failure to re-engage questions of whose interests are served by a particular strategy of managing "life," that unquestioned, may produce precisely the opposite conditions from the rhetoric deployed.

One of the legacies of Locke's conception of the body as a possession is the body's inviolability, theorized in response to monarchical excesses in violating the bodies of its subjects. While the establishment of boundaries (*immunitas*) bio-politically has importance, the discourses of self-determination teeters on the verge of an overcorrection that reifies the separateness of individuals as islands of self-mastery and owned accomplishment. Unless one adheres to a script of reified autonomy, one is suddenly a danger to the community, which ironically enough, bears its own reified quality as collection of autonomous agents. The semantic slippage between "self" and "other," "us" and "them," belies relational *interdependence* (that is, *communitas*) as the true referent for conceptualizing education. Wehmeyer is correct in the identification of "opportunity" and "threat" as part of defining agency, but it is not the whole of agency. The "threat" that impels the movement of *immunitas* to "immunize" bears its own risk in overwhelming the constructive features that allow "agents" to form a *communitas*.

While, no doubt, developing decision-making skills and setting goals are crucial to the educational experience of any student, disabled or otherwise, learning from Dewey, educators should conclude that there is more to education than simply being self-reliant. Much more work is needed to engage Dewey's democratic ethic in ways proposed by this essay, particularly where special education is concerned. The crucial ethical question for educators is: Can we conceptualize an ethic where extreme dependence is no less valorized than independence?

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1. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter on Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

2. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978–1979*, eds. Michel Snellart, François Ewald, and Alesandro Fontana, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol.1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vantage Books, 1990).

3. Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 45–77.

4. Michael L. Wehmeyer, "Beyond Self-Determination: Causal Agency Theory," *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities* 16, no. 4 (2004): 337–59.

5. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 1–19.

6. Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory: A Macro-Theory of Human Motivation, Development, and Health," *Canadian Psychology* 49, no. 3 (2008): 182–85.

7. Sharon Field, Jim Martin, Robert Miller, Michael Ward, and Michael Wehmeyer, *A Practical Guide to Teaching Self-Determination* (Reston, Va.: Council of Exceptional Children, 1998).

8. Field et al., *A Practical Guide*, 2.

9. See the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Self-Determination Technical Assistance Center http://www.sdtac.uncc.edu/project_description.asp for a summary of self-determination assessment tools available to special educators.

10. James E. Martin, Dennis E. Mithaug, Phil Cox, Lori Y. Peterson, Jamie E. Dycke, and Mary E. Cash, "Increasing Self-Determination: Teaching Students to Plan, Evaluate, Work and Adjust," *Exceptional Children* 69, no. 4 (2003): 431–47.

11. See Field et al., *A Practical Guide*; and James Martin, Jamie L. Van Dycke, W. Robert Christiansen, Barbara Greene, J. Emmett Gardner, and David L. Lovett, "Increasing Student Participation in IEP Meetings: Establishing the Self-Directed IEP as an Evidenced Based Practice," *Exceptional Children* 72, no. 3 (2006): 299–316.

12. Meagan Karvonen, David W. Test, Wendy M. Wood, and Rob Algozzine, "Putting Self-Determination into Practice," *Exceptional Children* 1, no. 1 (2004); and Field et al., *A Practical Guide*.

13. Karrie A. Shogren et al., "Understanding the Construct of Self-Determination: Examining the Relationship Between the Arc's Self-Determination Scale and the American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale," *Assessment for Effective Intervention* 33, no. 2 (2008): 94–107, (emphasis added).

14. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 135–45.

15. Ibid.

16. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 22–23.

17. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208–26.

18. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 22–23.

19. Esposito, *Bíos*, 45–77. See also Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010).

20. Locke, *Two Treatises*, 113–14.

21. Esposito, *Bíos*. See the introduction by Timothy Campbell for a summary of Esposito's reading of the etymological origins of *communitas*, vii–xlii.

22. Ibid., ix–xiii.

23. Ibid., 49–77.

24. Wehmeyer, "Beyond Self-Determination," 337–59.

25. Fields et al., *A Practical Guide*; and Wehmeyer, "Beyond Self-Determination," 337–59.

26. Wehmeyer, "Beyond Self-Determination," 351.

27. Esposito, *Bíos*, 70.

28. Wehmeyer, "Beyond Self-Determination," 353.

29. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.

30. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 22.

31. Ibid., 36–59.