THE DEMOCRATIC IMPERATIVE TO ADDRESS
SEXUAL EQUALITY RIGHTS IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract. Issues of sexual orientation elicit ethical debates in schools and society. In jurisdictions where a legal right has not yet been established, one argument commonly rests on whether schools ought to address issues of same-sex relationships and marriage on the basis of civil equality, or whether such controversial issues ought to remain in the private sphere. Drawing upon an antiperfectionist liberal framework, Dianne Gereluk argues that schools have an obligation to educate students in two important ways. First, students must develop an awareness and understanding of the range of acceptable and permissible ways of life that may lead to human flourishing. Second, students must understand the requisite protections and recognition afforded to individuals in a pluralist society.

Introduction

Canada is at the tipping point in securing protections for sexual orientation and providing same-sex couples equal access to marriage. On the one hand, at the federal government level the question of whether homosexuals should be provided with equal rights is closed, while, on the other hand, public social institutions still wrestle with this issue as controversial and open for debate.1 Specifically, the right to sexual equality is guaranteed, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited, under section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.2 Such discrimination also is prohibited in provincial human rights legislation throughout Canada. Furthermore, the right to equal access to marriage became a legal right in 2005 under the Civil Marriages Act.3 In all of these instances, the political values of liberty and equality are central to the justification for securing protections for sexual orientation and guaranteeing the right to same-sex marriage. The right to equal access to opportunities encompasses the civil liberties that support the freedom and dignity of the individual. The right to same-sex marriage is not considered a fundamental right in itself, but rather hinges on another right, that of equal access to an opportunity that has been provided to one group of individuals to the exclusion of another.

While federal law has taken a clear stance on the issue of sexual equality, education is a provincial responsibility and the issue of sexual equality remains a site of contestation in the school systems. In recent years, different localities have enacted different policies with respect to teaching about human sexuality.

For instance, following a Charter challenge regarding the censorship of books depicting same-sex couples in the elementary family life curriculum, the Surrey School District in British Columbia became the first school district to offer an inclusive representation of different familial relationships by including age-appropriate books on various familial relationships that included same-sex families. In Alberta, recent legislation requires that schools provide prior written notice to parents with the option to opt their children out any time religion, sexual orientation, or human sexuality is primarily or explicitly addressed in the classroom. Ontario’s recent antibullying legislation gives particular emphasis to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, intersex, queer and questioning people, and further requires that schools be able to name a club a “gay-straight alliance.” Quebec’s mandatory Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum promotes the recognition of others by inviting students to discuss a range of different and potentially competing comprehensive religious and moral doctrines with the aim of understanding individuals’ rights and dignity. Taken together, all of these cases illustrate that there exists in Canada a spectrum of educational policies concerning how sexual orientation is addressed in schools. To be sure, the debate regarding the extent to which sexual equality rights should be addressed in schools is far from closed.

Given this contested state, I wish to put forth a political argument based on antiperfectionist liberalism that holds that the political principles of liberty and equality provide a robust justification for addressing issues related to sexual equality in two important ways. First, students ought to understand the numerous and various meaningful relationships (including same-sex relationships) that allow individuals to flourish in their lives. The educative task in this sense is to develop an awareness, acceptance, and recognition of these various relationships. Second, students should then understand that, as civic equals in a pluralist society, same-sex couples must be afforded legal protections and have equal access to marriage. While the courts have attempted to attend to violations of equal access and human dignity, schools ought to assume the educative task of fostering the political ideals and dispositions that contribute to a just and stable society of free and equal citizens. The political principles of liberty and equality are consistent with a particular politics of recognition in which students come to understand both


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their requisite obligations to recognize and accept same-sex relationships, and the broader political rights that underpin the foundations of a pluralist society.

Let us turn to the antiperfectionist liberal framework upon which this argument will be based.

**Antiperfectionist Liberalism**

The political principles of liberty and equality are commonly applied to define the rules and regulations within the public sphere of pluralist societies. John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* specifically attended to how societies ought to develop a coherent, consistent set of political principles to structure public and social institutions despite citizens’ fundamental religious, philosophical, and moral differences about how one should lead one’s life. The antiperfectionist perspective would refrain from those discussions that challenge fundamental beliefs about how one should lead one’s life. It would limit such discussions to considering and protecting individuals’ capacity for a sense of justice and their capacity for a conception of the good under the principles of liberty and equality. Specifically, Rawls states:

i. One such power is the capacity for a sense of justice: it is the capacity to understand, to apply, and to act from [and not merely in accordance with] the principles of political justice that specify the fair terms of social cooperation.

ii. The other moral power is a capacity for a conception of the good: it is the capacity to have, to revise, and rationally pursue a conception of the good. Such a conception is an ordered family of final ends and aims which specifies a person’s conception of what is of value in human life or, alternatively, of what is regarded as a fully worthwhile life. The elements of such a conception are normally set within, and interpreted by, certain comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrines in the light of which the various ends and aims are ordered and understood.

These two moral powers provide the basis of what a political structure of society ought to ensure to its citizens to enable them to carry out a life as equal persons within the parameters of reasonable pluralism. The political conception of justice requires that all citizens accept the core political values of a democracy, which include “the freedom and equality of women, the equality of children as future citizens, [and] the freedom of religion.”

The capacity for a sense of justice and the capacity for a conception of the good have direct implications for the consideration of issues related to sexual orientation. A capacity for a sense of justice requires that social cooperation is present among individuals in society. Social cooperation has three essential features: publicly recognized rules and procedures, reciprocity and mutuality, and rational advantage, or good. These three components outline the basic rights and

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10. Ibid., 601.
11. Ibid., 6.
duties “between citizens regarded as free and equal and as both reasonable and rational, and as normal and fully cooperating members of society over a complete life.”

The second aspect — a capacity for the conception of the good — recognizes that “persons’ conceptions of the good are not fixed but form and develop as they mature, and may change more or less radically over the course of life.” This has particular relevance in thinking about individuals’ opportunities for exposure to alternative perspectives beyond the private sphere of their families and local communities. It requires that children can consider, evaluate, and have access to various opportunities that may bring value to their particular lives.

In considering the implications of these two higher moral powers, Rawls addresses two main principles of justice, those of liberty and equality:

a. Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and

b. Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle).

The two principles guide us in setting basic rights and duties that are assigned in the fundamental structure of society — political, economic, and social institutions — and, in turn, these principles honor the liberal ideal of free and equal persons. By limiting liberal theory to a political conception, Rawls wishes to avoid debating the merits and weaknesses of comprehensive doctrines, and instead focuses on considering how we can create certain rules and procedures under which individuals can live cohesively despite competing conceptions of the good.

Yet, it is at this point that questions arise regarding the extent to which the antiperfectionist liberal framework can address issues related to sexual orientation and same-sex marriage — issues that (it is often assumed) can only be addressed in terms of a comprehensive moral doctrine of how one should lead one’s life. Rawls himself suggests that his theory should be restricted to matters of politics, and the state should refrain from interfering with issues that attempt to promote a particular conception of the good. In this case, one might argue that sexual orientation and same-sex marriage are issues that necessarily involve questions of a more comprehensive nature. If this is the case, then Rawls’s theory may provide little assistance in defining the parameters for public policy, and therefore issues of same-sex marriage and sexual orientation, given that they are comprehensive by nature, ought to remain outside of the discussion in schools.

12. Ibid., 8.
Given the morally contentious issue of same-sex relationships and marriage, three challenges emerge concerning the limitations of applying the antiperfectionist framework. First, the right to marriage is not specified as a basic liberty, and thus it is assumed that Rawls's framework cannot protect this right. In his contribution to this symposium, Michael Hand contends that the “right to marry” is not one of the basic liberties listed in the Rawlsian scheme and that if Rawls believes there is an antiperfectionist basis for extending this right to same-sex couples, he “owes us an argument for it.” Second, the antiperfectionist framework’s position on political neutrality restricts it from entering into morally contentious issues. Third, given the comprehensive nature of issues related to sexual orientation and same-sex marriage, it is assumed that a moral framework must be applied in considering whether same-sex relationships of an intimate nature are valuable. Let me turn next to the first of these criticisms.

The first challenge is that the political framework cannot be applied because the right to marriage is not one of the basic liberties listed by Rawls. While critics are indeed correct that the “right to marriage” is not a basic liberty specified by Rawls, the criticism is misplaced. The fundamental right is not a right to marriage itself, but rather the equal access to such an opportunity that a legal statute has provided to one group. Such a debate arose in Canada when the Civil Marriage Act was passed into law, providing couples of the same sex with equal access to marriage for civil purposes. The decision to pass the act was largely predicated upon a determination by the Supreme Court of Canada that the rights of homosexual persons were protected by the equality provisions of section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that guarantee that individuals have the “right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination.”

“Equal protection” and “equal benefit” are key phrases here. The Charter does not solely prohibit any form of discrimination that has an adverse effect on the particular protected individual; it also prohibits actions that deprive individuals of benefits to which others have access. Failure to provide members of one group access to a benefit accorded to those in another group is a form of discrimination and, further, would violate individuals’ human dignity as free and equal persons. The protection of same-sex couples’ equal access to marriage also honors the broader political principles of tolerance, respect, and equality that are consistent with the Canadian Charter. Thus, the first challenge by perfectionist liberals that “marriage” is not a basic liberty listed under the Rawlsian scheme is irrelevant because it is an opportunity that must be made available to all on an equal basis, under the principle of equal access to an opportunity or good. The first concern that same-sex marriage is not a basic liberty and therefore cannot be protected under an antiperfectionist framework is unwarranted given that the emphasis is on the right to equal access.

15. See Michael Hand, “Framing Classroom Discussion of Same-Sex Marriage,” in this issue, 505.
16. Civil Marriage Act, ch. 33.
The second challenge posed to antiperfectionists is that given the stance on political neutrality, the state cannot take a position on sexual equality due to its morally comprehensive and contested nature. Three interpretations of political neutrality are commonly cited:

1. No political action may be undertaken or justified on the ground that it promotes an ideal of the good or on the ground that it enables individuals to pursue an ideal of the good.

2. No political action may be undertaken if it makes a difference to the likelihood that a person will endorse one conception of the good or another, or to the person’s chances of realizing his or her conception of the good, unless other actions are undertaken which cancel out such effects.

3. One of the main goals of governmental authority, which is lexically prior to any other, is to ensure for all persons an equal ability to pursue in their lives and promote in their societies any ideal of the good of their choosing.17

Of the three interpretations of political neutrality offered here, I take the third position in which political neutrality does not mean that one is absent from morally contested issues. As I have argued earlier, political neutrality prioritizes the equal ability to an opportunity or good.

The third criticism is that freedom in and of itself is not necessarily valuable, particularly if the sole criterion for freedom is simply enhancing individual choices that do not further individuals’ pursuit of the good. For Joseph Raz, autonomy is “valuable only if exercised in pursuit of the good.”18 While Raz acknowledges that there will be disagreement about what constitutes the good life in society, the state may have some justification for promoting certain goods that are widely agreed upon or even recommending certain goods that are subject to disagreement. Drawing upon Raz’s perfectionist liberal framework, Hand contends that particular marriage laws that are set by the state are “designed to perpetuate and encourage participation in certain kinds of intimate relationships. They represent an ethical judgment on the part of the state to the effect that stable monogamous relationships are good or valuable, and therefore worth supporting and promoting.”19 Ultimately, the questions that same-sex marriage raises are questions that ought to be addressed from a perfectionist frame, according to Hand, and he asserts further that perfectionist liberalism offers a way for the state to engage in matters of moral debate and take a nonneutral stance with regard to questions of the good life. For Hand, the issue of same-sex marriage necessarily draws upon questions of morality of a comprehensive nature, and in the end, assessments must be made as to whether same-sex marriage is morally valuable and ought to be recognized as such. Thus, Hand’s position is that what is required is not a political framework for addressing the issue of same-sex marriage in schools, but a moral framework for addressing that issue.

18. Ibid., 270.
I argue that a perfectionist frame for discussing same-sex marriage is neither necessary nor desirable. Evaluating whether a particular opportunity or good is morally valuable for individuals or the collective gets us into an uneasy predicament. It should not matter whether the particular activity arguably promotes the good of individuals or society. So long as the particular activity does not do undue harm or oppression to another individual, it is not the role of the state to decide what is morally valuable or laudable. I should wish to avoid claims about the moral weight of one particular activity over another. Unlike Hand, I am more skeptical that the perfectionist framework will be helpful in guiding discussion regarding the moral weight of same-sex marriage. Given the morally contested nature of the same-sex marriage issue, the approach that Hand favors seems to be an inappropriate approach to take in discussing this issue in schools.

Take, for instance, challenges to the granting of equal access to marriage. Various comprehensive doctrines that condemn homosexuality will not be persuaded with the epistemic criterion that Hand wishes to employ. For instance, conservative criticisms against same-sex marriage draw upon moral claims to support their case. Commonly, critics of equal access to marriage contend that heterosexual marriages should “occupy a privileged place today … [and] should continue to be regarded, in law and custom, as the ideal model for our society.” Under the perfectionist frame that Hand advocates, such a view would need to convincingly argue that heterosexual and same-sex marriages hold equal moral weight.

The antiperfectionist liberal framework does not invite participants to discuss the moral weight or value of different practices, but rather invites them to focus their attention on the equal protections that ought to be afforded to individuals as free and equal persons. If we grant access to some good or opportunity such as marriage to one particular group (heterosexual couples), then, arguably, such access ought to be granted to other groups (such as homosexual couples) as well. The antiperfectionist framework further requires that the state afford equal protections to homosexual couples, consistent with the broader political principle of providing equal concern and respect to all individuals. To discriminate based on one’s sexual orientation is to violate this fundamental principle.

Let me sum up thus far. In the first part of this article, I articulated how, under the antiperfectionist liberal framework, there is sufficient justification for same-sex relationships and marriage in a pluralist society based upon individuals’ fundamental right to equal access to an opportunity or good. Denying equal access to a particular group of individuals is a clear form of discrimination that contravenes the broader political values of equal concern and respect for individuals under the law. Under this framework, the issue of same-sex relationships and marriage ought to be addressed in classrooms, and children should be taught that

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such valuable relationships exist in a diverse society, and requisite protections are afforded to these relationships.

The perfectionist framework, on the other hand, suggests that the state and its institutions need not take a neutral stance with regard to questions of the good life. This is both problematic and undesirable in the case of morally contested issues such as same-sex marriage. Instead, I argue that the principle of equal protection and equal benefit to individuals under the law without discrimination provides the basis for a system of social cooperation in a pluralist society. Addressing the morally substantive arguments regarding whether such relationships are “good” takes educators beyond the acceptable parameters and infringes on competing private familial belief systems within diverse societies.

I wish now, in the second part of this article, to shift from considering the broader political principles that I have outlined in this section to considering the normative obligations that schools may have in teaching about same-sex relationships and marriage.

Addressing Issues of Sexual Orientation and Same-Sex Marriage in Schools

If we return to the two higher-order principles of a capacity for a conception of the good and a capacity for a sense of justice, part of the educational task, arguably, is to expose children to different ways of life that may lead to their flourishing. Developing in children an awareness and appreciation of various relationships opens them to some of the different ways in which individuals may lead flourishing lives.

The antiperfectionist perspective frames the way in which such issues are addressed and discussed in the classroom not only by invoking the political principles of toleration and respect among individuals as civic equals, but also in fostering a particular political recognition of individuals who lead various flourishing lives. Discussing same-sex relationships in antiperfectionist terms can help to foster and guide students’ understanding about different relationships that ought to be respected in a diverse society, consistent with the core principles of liberty and equality.

A curriculum that is representative of various relationships and that exhibits a respect for and acceptance of those relationships affords students the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions about what contributes to individuals’ flourishing. Exposure to a range of relationships in the curriculum also is bound to be educative for those students who may have limited awareness of the range of relationships that exist in their communities and in society.

Yet, the representation of a range of relationships [including same-sex relationships] in the curriculum affords further benefits to students and to society insofar as it fosters toleration among individuals. It has the potential to help students who may belong to same-sex families feel recognized as accepted and respected members of society, rather than feeling silenced due to the omission of such relationships from the curriculum. The representation, acknowledgment,
and recognition of same-sex relationships in the curriculum play an important educative role. Charles Taylor argues that recognition is not simply a courtesy paid out of respect; it also has a vital impact on the development of one’s identity:

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.21

When schools foster recognition of a diverse range of relationships, they contribute to the important project of bolstering the self-esteem of those individuals who are involved in such relationships. As Taylor writes, “Identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.”22 Mere avoidance of sensitive topics in schools neglects the essential dialogical relations upon which positive identity formation depends. It further marginalizes sexual minorities while reinforcing heterosexist norms and privileges in society. Thus, such recognition functions at two distinct levels. On a public level, all citizens (no matter what kinds of relationships they are involved in) need to be recognized as political equals who have rights like everyone else; on a private level, individuals need to be recognized as persons who have dignity and worth and are deserving of respect. While individuals can hold varying private moral views on how one should lead one’s life, they must be exposed to and develop an understanding of the range of flourishing relationships that are (and ought to be) tolerated in the public sphere of a liberal society.

On this view, recognizing a range of relationships (and the rights and dignity of those who are involved in such relationships) in the curriculum does not require, for instance, that every individual in the school condone those relationships in the private sphere. Still, teachings about same-sex relationships and marriage in schools ought to go beyond discussions about toleration and should inculcate an understanding and recognition of the rights that homosexual individuals have been afforded. David Archard puts it this way:

There is no reason to “celebrate” homosexuality any more than there is reason to celebrate heterosexuality. Neither need be seen as meriting the special and distinctive approbation of such a “celebration.” But equally it is not enough to encourage the mere toleration of homosexuality since toleration is the permission to exist what is disapproved of. No particular form of sexual activity should be recommended, celebrated, or promoted. It is the liberal ideal of sexual autonomy that should be promoted.23

While Archard argues for a kind of “neutrality” in the government’s justifications for sex education policy, this quotation suggests a nonneutral approach to teaching about sexual orientation in the liberal state. Here, a particular

22. Ibid., 231.
stance is taken regarding the autonomy rights of all individuals (regardless of sexual orientation). To develop an understanding of sexual autonomy rights, children will need to be exposed to public values that may lie in tension with some of their private moral values. While children need not be taught to celebrate same-sex relationships, toleration, acceptance, and political recognition of others ought to be fostered in children, consistent with the fundamental political principles of freedom and equality in liberal pluralist societies. A child can disagree about the moral value of same-sex relationships and marriage, but must understand that political rights and protections are owed to individuals involved in such relationships. On this view, moral disagreement can emerge and be tolerated within classroom discussions about human sexuality, but the political obligation to respect the autonomy rights of others must be viewed as nonnegotiable.

Exposing students to various relationships (including same-sex relationships) helps to broaden their awareness and understanding of different conceptions of the good. The values that are of primary concern here are toleration, political recognition, and respect for autonomy. Contrary to the perfectionist stance, teachers do not need to invite students to consider the moral worthiness or value of various relationships. The primary directive of the teacher from the antiperfectionist perspective is limited to developing in children, first, an awareness of a range of possible relationships that may lead to human flourishing and, second, an acknowledgment of the rights of those who are involved in various relationships.

The Political Requirement of Protecting Sexual Equality in Schools

In developing a capacity for a conception of the good, students should also develop an awareness, understanding, and recognition of same-sex relationships as an important part of the good life for some individuals. Additionally, developing a capacity for a sense of justice requires that students become aware of the political obligations that need to be fulfilled if the rights of individuals are to be protected on an equal basis. This means becoming aware of the legal protections against discrimination that are afforded to individuals regardless of sexual orientation. And as is the case in Canada, it also means developing an understanding that the principle of equal access to an opportunity or a good entails a right to same-sex marriage.

If we are to be sincere about offering protections to individuals as free and equal persons in a pluralist society, then schools (as one of the key public institutions in the overarching public structure of society) must take it upon themselves to cultivate dispositions in children that are consistent with the core principles of freedom and equality. In the latter section of this essay, I wish to make two points. First, consistent with an emphasis on the need to protect individuals’ rights, schools must address the topics of sexual orientation and same-sex relationships with a view toward promoting equality, respect, and toleration in society. Second, in addressing sexual equality rights, I suggest that schools must follow a particular political directive: one that does not involve encouraging students to condone a particular conception of the good, but rather involves fostering in students a
respect for the freedom of others to pursue their own conceptions of the good. Let me consider each of these points in turn.

Despite the contested and emotional nature of debates over sexual orientation and same-sex marriage, especially given different religious and moral stances on these issues, one of the clear aims of public education is to teach explicitly the civic values that underpin society. In learning to engage in robust democratic deliberation over issues such as these, students must develop an understanding of the rights, duties, and obligations that are attached to the abstract political principles of freedom and equality. Robert Kunzman suggests that a particular pedagogical framework may offer some principles for the type of deliberation that might be necessary in cases where there are substantial ethical differences. He starts with the following premises that certainly apply to questions about same-sex relationships, where there are deeply divided views from various religious and ethical frameworks:

1. Reasonable people will often disagree about the best way to live.
2. We can recognize that others’ views are reasonable (that is, we can see why they could reasonably think the way they do) and still believe that they are wrong.24

Kunzman argues that a distinction needs to be maintained between the private and public spheres (the latter of which has a civic and political component). In the private sphere, individuals will develop a particular ethical perspective that governs their beliefs and actions concerning how to live their own lives. In the public sphere, individuals must consider various ethical frameworks for understanding how we can live together despite our divergent positions about the good life. Schools ought not to neglect their obligation to discuss controversial or sensitive topics, but rather have a duty to engage in those issues that are central to the public discourse found in societies. As Kunzman asserts, “Public schools are one of the key elements of this civic realm.”25 The emphasis of classroom deliberation, he argues, should be on understanding and evaluating different ethical perspectives rather than on simply acknowledging the political power of the state to invoke a particular perspective. Civic dialogue in the classroom involves a commitment to recognizing the varied ethical perspectives upon which students draw. Yet, it also requires that students move past their individual ethical perspectives in order to develop the virtue of mutual respect for those who hold differing perspectives. It further allows for a value pluralism that balances the private interests of the individual with the public values that are necessary for stability and cohesion in civil society.

If we adopt Kunzman’s approach, controversial issues such as same-sex relationships and marriage ought to be discussed as part of the larger civic dialogue. The emphasis is on the political values that are nonnegotiable and part

25. Ibid., 81.
of a democratic society. Regardless of their own sexual orientation and private moral beliefs, students must come to understand that same-sex relationships should be both respected and acknowledged as an important part of the good life for many people. In a free and diverse society, the teacher has a role in developing students’ understanding of same-sex relationships and of how those who enter such relationships must be accorded respect.

Teaching about same-sex relationships and marriage with a particular emphasis on protecting individuals’ rights and liberties is not unlike other historically contested political and moral battles where the entrenchment of individual rights required that educators take a normative stance in order to change public perceptions. Two cases highlight this point. The right for women to be considered as “persons” and thereby fit to vote and hold public office, arising out of the suffragette movement, required a clear educational response to teach that women must be considered as equals. The second case can be found in the civil rights movement, which helped establish a right for African Americans to equal protection and benefits as citizens under the law. These movements required educational directives aimed at protecting the rights of and enhancing opportunities for groups who previously did not hold such rights. The lesson here is that avoiding the topics of same-sex relationships and marriage in schools, or attempting to address such topics in a “neutral” way that fails to encourage respect for those who enter into such relationships, are insufficient stances to take in a liberal society.

Within a classroom discussion, one could envisage students expressing reasonable dissent given the controversial nature of same-sex marriage. While this would be within the permissible parameters of discussing controversial topics, it would at the same time be necessary to direct students to recognition of the rights of same-sex couples under the broader political principles of liberty and equality. There is a clear political directive on the part of the teacher to make students aware of the protections against discrimination that must be afforded to all individuals on an equal basis, irrespective of sexual orientation. What civic deliberation in a classroom requires is that students become aware that same-sex relationships are permissible within the boundaries of reasonable pluralism and that the rights of same-sex couples are guaranteed in a liberal democratic society.

Conclusion

In a liberal pluralist society, schools offer civic education to promote in students dispositions of respect and toleration for their fellow citizens. At one level, part of the educative task is to expose children to a host of acceptable and permissible ways of life that may lead to human flourishing. In this case, same-sex relationships are to be considered as one of many ways in which individuals flourish and find value in their lives. Educators must encourage toleration and recognition of relationships that historically have not been well represented in school curricula, which arguably has amounted to systemic discrimination against particular groups of individuals.
Yet, just as the courts work to expand sexual equality rights to remedy violations of equal protection and human dignity, so should schools do the educational work of expanding students' political consciousness to include others who historically have been treated as less than fully rights-bearing. Students are free to maintain their private moral views about same-sex relationships. However, it is the teacher’s responsibility to explain that while private moral views may differ, the political recognition, respect, and protection that is owed to all citizens on an equal basis is not a matter of controversy.