

The Right to Educational Autonomy

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Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* displays the intricacies of free will and autonomy through the eyes of clones whose only purpose is to accept their fate of sacrificing their bodies at the discretion of an inherently restrictive system. The clones are expected to accept the roles consigned to them upon birth and have little freedom of choice over their lives or education. The clones in the novel are created with the sole intent to serve society as carers and organ donors. They do not get to choose the direction of their lives or careers, creating a tenuous relationship between what they truly control and what is preordained. Similarly, children today face an educational system that strips them of the right to decide the course of their education. The intense regulation of children's learning through the jurisdiction of parents, with the help and support of government laws, such as *The Parents Bill Of Rights*, can leave students little option to broaden the horizons of their knowledge. If parents must have the final say in what their children can or cannot learn in school, to what extent should their power extend and should children under sixteen be given full autonomy and freedom throughout their education, unlike the clones in the novel. In Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, the clones' knowledge about the world is restricted to their role in society as carers and organ donors. Similarly, children today are meant to learn from highly regulated curriculums they have little control over. The limitation of children's education by parental or guardian figures disallows children's power and autonomy throughout their educational journeys and can inhibit their opportunities in the future.

The novel explores notions of censorship through the limited education of the clones. As stated, the clones lack genuine autonomy over their education, let alone their lives. Their life course is laid out through the framework of their education, which is built to encourage their cooperation as working cogs in a society built against them. They have zero control over their lives and readily accept where they are “supposed to be” (Ishiguro 288). The clones' identities have been carved out for them by the guardians, who choose what they learn and when. The limited freedom they receive, such as creative expression, allows them a false sense of freedom and autonomy over the course of their lives. Limited freedom prohibits the clones from learning that there is more to life than what they are given, making their freedom superficial. It leaves them ill-prepared for the real world beyond their predetermined role in society. They are led to believe they have a choice over

their lives when they do not. This false sense of true freedom ensures they believe in their societal role and will not deviate from it. Lack of autonomy over their early education affects many aspects of their lives beyond a grim position in society, such as the little knowledge they have about sexuality or sexual health, how to think for themselves, and what it means to look toward their futures beyond what they are told they are and how to be it. The clones are let out into the world with a false sense of freedom in regulated conditions where they are granted exploration to educate themselves. Freedom differs from autonomy based on permitted exploration only within the Cottages, a prearranged zone, where they are kept until needed for harvest.

This notion of the clones being stuck on a route of life that is not of their own volition is expressed well in the relationship between them and their guardians. Such is the case with Miss Emily, who the clones had "a real sense of feeling bad" upon disappointing her, and their guilt at "let[ting] down Miss Emily" (Ishiguro 43) represents a tie to and restriction of the expectations set for them. The clones are expected to act the way guardians want them to, and being told on the "regular" that they are "'unworthy of privilege'" and have misused the opportunities (Ishiguro 43) given to them elevates their sense of guilt. Controlling the clones' guilt allows the guardians, and in this case, Miss Emily, to subtly connect the clones more closely to the identities set out for them and reinforces their false sense of freedom. Disallowing the clones from expressing themselves or learning beyond the curriculum containing them encourages their cooperation. The guardians weaponizing their position as an adult authority and using the guilt of disobedience ensures the clones continue along the educational journey the guardians have set for them. Also, it secures the clones' cooperation despite their feelings, aspirations, or curiosities. Such as Kathy, who found inspiration in a song about a woman and her baby, whom the woman was informed would be impossible to have. During one listen, Kathy sways a pillow in her arms like a baby and sings along. When she is caught cradling her imaginary baby, her music tape disappears a few months later, thus curbing her fascination.

The "guardians (...) timed very carefully and deliberately" what the students learned and when, so they "were always just too young to understand" their place in the world (Ishiguro 82). So, by the time they were old enough to understand "all [the] information (...) in [their] heads" that had sat there for years, never properly examined (Ishiguro 82), they were stuck in the position society wanted for them. The students are never given the opportunity to think critically beyond

what the guardians regulated. The most power guardians allotted to the students was with their artistic expression as they held frequent art shows. As far as the clones are aware, they create art for themselves. They create art to sell and promote themselves but are never allowed to learn how their art is utilized outside of the school. Expression through artwork is a privilege only employed within the confines of their schooling and is disallowed outside of this timeframe. This limited ability to express themselves prevents them from functioning outside their assigned role and can affect how they view and treat themselves and each other in the future.

The most guidance the clones received regarding sex was that they "couldn't have babies from doing it" (Ishiguro 128) and nothing beyond that. Strictly regulating a topic such as sexual health leaves one too many uncertainties in their lives that they cannot explain. Without a proper education in sexual aspects of life, the clones are left having things "happen(...) without [their] really" wanting it to and having confusing, funny feelings of which they had been warned would happen (Ishiguro 128) but do not know how to handle. The clones cannot discern what is and is not consensual, which is a necessary aspect of every sexual encounter. Only informing the clones that they are not capable of having children and letting them figure out the rest puts them at risk of harm, such as infection, injury, or assault. Regulating such important information forces the clones to remain ignorant and puts them in danger of being taken advantage of by others. All they are meant to know is that they cannot have children. Anything beyond that is uncharted and deemed unnecessary information. For example, Kathy worries that "somehow [her and Tommy] lacked intimacy" (Ishiguro 238), but they are not sure what intimacy entails. In this regard, the exploration into their curiosity of the unknown and information on the subject is obstructed, thus preventing them from learning about themselves on a deeper level.

The issue in the novel lies with the need for more variety in the clones' educations, as their strict and fixed itinerary does not allow them full autonomy throughout their lives. This encourages the idea that the clones do not deserve the same rights to autonomy that the non-clones do in their world due to their status as such. Similarly, according to the *Parents Bill of Rights*, children today have their rights to educational autonomy handed over to their parents and thus do not have full liberty to reign their lives during their school years. The issue here suggests that they do not deserve the autonomy to decide their educational journey and must remain under the guidance of their parents, just as the clones are under the guidance of their guardians. In both cases, the students and

the clones are put on a confining and censored educational track and then let out into the world with minimal experience in how to self-govern or think for themselves. They have been taught within and then actively learn to accept the structure that restricts them.

In 2023, Education Minister Jeremy Cockrill introduced a new legislation called the *Parents Bill of Rights*. Introduced in early October, the bill has since been passed in Saskatchewan as of October 20, 2023. The *Parents Bill of Rights* works to ensure "that parents are at the forefront of every important decision in their child's life" (Government of Saskatchewan) and focuses on putting power and responsibility in parent's hands so they can properly educate their children. The topic has been quite the debate as many do not agree with certain aspects of the bill despite the "policy recogni[zing] that students must feel that they are respected and free to express themselves within a safe and welcoming school environment" and has expressed that the bill exists with the intent to "support students" and recognizing the vital "role that parents and guardians have in protecting and supporting their children as they grow and develop" (Government of Saskatchewan).

One side of the argument asserts that the bill strips children of educational autonomy despite the policy's promise of prioritizing children's best interests. The policy implies heavy surveillance over students during school hours, such as regular reports on "the pupil's attendance, behaviour, and academic achievement in school," making parents "the primary decision maker" over the "courses of study the pupil enrolls in," and giving parents the right to "withdraw the pupil from (...) presentation[s]," more specifically, presentations involving "sexual health content" (Government of Saskatchewan). The bill restricts children's educational autonomy and, to a degree, privacy at school. It puts too much power into the hands of parents, and that power can extend far beyond guiding their children and instead lead to control. Allowing parents a definitive and final say in the route of their child's education leaves children with a false sense of governance over their education. It forces them down a path that may inhibit them in the future. Children, while young, are still people and retain the right to autonomy in every aspect of life, especially their educational autonomy.

Handing full rights to parents suggests children cannot make the proper educational decisions. It embeds them as "needy and dependent" on their parents "for the ideal fulfillment of their developmental needs" (Moschella 38), which begs, *To Whom Do Children Belong?* Moschella argues that "failing to provide [students] with an education for autonomy would significantly

decrease their chances of leading a good life" (121). Handing over a child's educational rights to their guardians shelters children from vital elements in education, such as "exposure to diverse worldviews, engagement with criticisms of one's own worldview, and the development of critical thinking skills" (Moschella 121). Children will always seek "a degree of personal sovereignty" (Moschella 123), and school, especially high school, is where the creation of a child's identity comes to fruition. Governing a pupil's education also inhibits their chances and opportunities to explore their interests and form a more concrete identity. As Koren states, "information plays an important role in the development of a human being" as both an individual with unique characteristics and "as a social being, supporting social and cultural participation" (61).

The encroachment of "one's life and personal space and especially one's own self-regarding choices" is an inviolable act (Adams 8). Autonomy is a distinct and valued component of human life, and depriving individuals of their right to autonomy effectively devalues the importance of those rights, making them superficial (Adams 22). Suppose a child is not given the educational autonomy they are owed, which humans value highly. In that case, they are missing a large part of what makes them, arguably, human. Allowing "adults to exercise their freedom" to control and "subvert the developing autonomy of children" (Adams 191) is an unfair reality that strangles a child's future options and opportunities. It is vital to a child's personal growth to allow them control over their early education. The power handed to parents can be abused, allowing parents to live vicariously through their children by controlling their education, thus controlling their futures and making children's lives malleable for change by a guardian's discretion.

Further, the bill allows parents to closely regulate sexual health content, which is a sad cover-up for the discriminatory and highly repressive part of the legislation that states teachers need to acquire the consent of parents to use a "pupil's new gender-related preferred name or gender identity at school" (Government of Saskatchewan). The censoring and control of sexual health content and sexuality/gender expression is an unnecessary measure that only exists "to ensure (...) a status quo" that suits a selective "group of (...) privileged elites" (Adams 193). Along the same lines, Koren agrees that "access to information," knowledge, and education in general are the "conditions for the protection and promotion of human development" (55). Sexual health content is beneficial and relevant information that warns youths of potential harms like STDs and educates them on terms like consent, and censoring such content is both unnecessary and encourages unsafe

situations. That section of the policy is a hypocritical endeavour that seeks to protect children from explicit content but, at the same time, exposes them to the danger of ignorance just as over-policing of children's education curriculum hinders their ability to express themselves and curate their intellectual journey to best suit their future prospects.

Parents hold "hopeful anticipation (...) for their child[ren] in [the] academic realm" and often take great pride in their child's "academic achievement" (Seginer 6), so it makes sense that some find it reasonable to put more power into parents' hands. If a guardian can more closely monitor their child's education, they know where and how to support them to the best of their abilities. A "parent, guardian, or caregiver who is deeply involved in his or her child's educational experiences" (Hiltz 27) more closely entangles them in the school community. Elevating the level of parental involvement in schools as an advocate (Hiltz 29) in deciding their child's curriculum allows the parent or guardian to anticipate what is best for their child and how to achieve the ideal prospect and take correct actions to guide them appropriately. Parents should be involved in every aspect of their child's life, especially their education. School is one of the most influential socializing factors in anyone's life, and having a parent—who serves as a bridge between the school, a more public aspect of life, and the home, a private sphere—be more involved in a pupil's education creates an anchor of familiarity that children can rely upon. Allowing children too much free reign over their education leaves them vulnerable to harm. A parent's guidance is essential to ensure the safety and growth of their children, but good intentions do not always translate well through systematic structures such as this bill. Ideally, parents will want what is best for their children and guide them healthily through their educational journey while considering what is best for them.

Unfortunately, it is a fallacy to assume that all parents want what is best for their children and that "parental knowledge as presented by folk wisdom and natural indicators" may not be beneficial for "parents to become better forecasters" of their child's best interest as often "parents' own criteria of ability may (...) interfere" with the actual educational abilities or intrigue of their children (Seginer 13). The issue then becomes less about "safeguarding children's" (Koren 71) safety through parents regulating content and more about controlling children and thus stripping children of their rights to autonomy and choice. While there are benefits to stricter education regulation, a "child's best interests should" not be solely based "on what adults think, but also on what the child thinks" (Koren 59). What should be done is to allow parents full access to the curriculum.

However, instead of having parents be the final decision-makers on what their children can and cannot learn, children should be allowed to meet with parents and teachers in a professional setting to discuss and negotiate a medium between what the pupil wants and what the guardian wants regarding the pupil's education.

Issues of autonomy are relevant topics in modern debates today, especially those regarding children's rights, themes of which can be identified in literary works such as the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Ishiguro references the censorship of information as a tool to enforce and restrain the clones to specific roles in society. Similarly, children whose educational autonomy is taken are left vulnerable to the enforcement by those who hold power over them, inhibiting their freedom. Acknowledging the consequences of too much power put in the hands of adults who, it is important to note, already wield power over their children as parents can lead to dangerous outcomes and abuse of power. Government and school administrators alike should listen to children's voices and acknowledge them as actors who deserve full reign over their agency and autonomy. Disallowing children from being the sole decider in their education denies them the right to learn and grow at their own pace and be the solitary conductors of their futures, so it is vital to recognize children as people who are just as worthy of wielding the power of autonomy as their adult counterparts to ensure they can grow to be unique and functional individuals.

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