

What is a school? An answer consistent with human rights

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Abstract This article relates the philosophical and conceptual study of educational institutions with educational policy. I argue that both the descriptive and prescriptive answer to “what a school is” should focus on the school that is important, which is the central case. This central case of a school should embody an ethos of openness towards the basic goods. This translates into rights discourse as a school which respects human rights. From this description I propose policy for evaluating, ranking and developing educational institutions and focused on the merit of philosophy and theology departments in educational institutions.

Keywords School · Human rights · Basic goods · Natural law · Ranking · Evaluation · Ethos

Introduction

This article relates the philosophical and conceptual study of educational institutions with educational policy.

Thinking about education from the point of view of principals, policy makers and administrators—whose concerns go beyond the confines of the classroom—often do revolve around the school as a whole. But what exactly is that, a “school?” An answer to this question, albeit academic and conceptual, has important policy implications. After all, how we answer that question will decide how we will craft our own “school.”

Two ways to answer that question

The prescriptive rejoinder

For educators who agree with Article 26.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UNESCO’s statement on human rights education (www.unesco.org), and

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who believe that education should be related to human rights, there is a quick *pre-scriptive* rejoinder: *whatever a school is*, it *ought to be* a place where human rights are not merely taught, but practiced. And this kind of practiced respect for human rights must be experienced structurally throughout the school in its curriculum and its extra-curricula activities. The reason is simple: if teachers in the classroom teach students to promote human rights, while the school does not exemplify a practiced respect for human rights in its structure, there will be a blatant inconsistency. There would be a self-contradiction, where one's words are diametrically at odds with one's actions or performances. It would be as if I shouted at you that "one should not shout," or if I told you that I am not to talk. This kind of self-contradiction is of course pedagogically harmful. Students who study in such a school will find themselves confused. On the other hand, if a school embodies a respect for human rights, no such confusion will likely arise. Not only that, the kinds of positive observance of human rights could be instructive. What better way is there to teach and inspire than through a culture, an ethos and an environment that supports and furthers human rights? Such a sketch of a school is found in the section "A school worth describing."

The descriptive analysis

Nonetheless, not all educators are convinced of the importance of human rights education. And they would not be willing to sidestep the descriptive question: "what is a school?" The intuitive attraction of the descriptive project is that it is aimed at something free of our preferential prejudices: whatever you think it *ought to be*, a "school" is this—no more and no less. Even so, there are reasons why this kind of descriptive research ends up focusing our attention on the school which embodies a respect for human rights. The sections that follow supply just such stand-alone reasons that are independent of a prior commitment to human rights education. My suggestion is that only such a concept of a "school" is worth our intellectual attention. Meaning, even if an educational stakeholder has no prior commitment to human rights education, he or she still needs to take seriously the school which respects human rights. Such a school is one which embodies an "ethos of openness to human goods", or what are natural or human rights. And, like someone already committed to human rights education, he or she needs to adopt that school as a model with which to evaluate all other schools.

And the *descriptive* analysis begins with the question we posed at the start: "What is a school?" An answer to that can begin, innocently enough, from a familiar experience.

A school worth describing

It is 6 a.m. in the morning. The first school bus arrives to unload its passengers— young boys and girls, some weighed down by a heavy backpack. Other students begin to saunter through the gate to begin a new day. Teachers rush towards classrooms and the staff rooms, preparing to deliver lessons on arithmetic, languages and the sciences, and the principal walks about to ensure all is in order, before returning to the office to sort out the pile of administrative duties awaiting his attention—all this with a view to ensuring that students succeed on obtaining an educational certificate, which will

in turn either enable entrance into a higher educational institute, or perhaps obtain a job, pay for meals, support entertainment, live and live well. . . This is a school.

Elsewhere in another part of the world something like this is happening. Students come in much earlier. Teachers and pupils organize themselves. Some huddle in the cold, while others adjust the holsters in which their heavy machine-guns nest. They sit in rooms where chalk boards describe maps of surrounding jungles and instructors explain how best to surprise and survive. Now and then a man walks about to punish the distracted child and to enforce desirable behavior. This scene may be less familiar, but nonetheless exists. Or, at least, one very much like this exists. For instance, the Quaker UNO ethnographic study of child soldiers reports the daily life of the child, who is taught, amongst other things, “how to enter enemy territory and collect information. . .how to write detailed reports. . .[how] to be the keeper of detailed records [of weapons]” (see Keairns, 2002, p. 23). And this too is a school.

Schools Alike and Different

Unlike the first one described in the previous paragraph, this second school prepares children to fight a war, and to survive in it, but like the one above the participants (students, teachers, administrative personnel. . .) coordinate themselves to teach and to learn. These two descriptions of schools, at once *alike in some respects and different in other respects*, do not exhaust the *analogous* versions of a “school” (see Finnis, 1998, pp. 42–47). We can imagine many other schools. There are those which focus on teaching dance, or music, or painting, instead of mathematics and science. Other schools teach the same things our school would teach, but perhaps more or less effectively. Still others have more teachers, and have more students, and are better equipped.

When confronted with the reality that there are so many kinds of schools, and so many ways a school can be a school, how can we better understand what schools are?

We could go about describing each school, and someone with a good eye for detail would quite accurately articulate every possible nook and cranny. We could collect each of these detailed descriptions and compile them into a kind of an encyclopedia, or school directory. This may be one way to proceed. Yet, such a “stamp collection” of schools may not be very useful. Whilst this may be a fine leatherbound collection of facts, not everything in it is significant or illuminating. For: not everything in such a collection is worth knowing. Not everything is important.

Indeed, for participants in the educational industry, whether teachers, school administrators or leaders, or policy makers, thinking about a “school” is not collecting and accumulating trivia. The description of a school which is for us significant is relative to *what we think is important* (Finnis, 1980, pp. 3–9). For: we are interested in and value data about schools, which serve and serve well these important objective(s). So a description of how a military school is run and what it consists of is not going to be important for someone who thinks that there will never be war, and that military defense is not important. If on the other hand someone imagines his country constantly under threat of invasion, then understanding how a school which services military training becomes illuminating. As it is, schools which are *means for* (through being effective and relevant) achieving these important ends come to be worth our analysis and investigation.

How then shall we proceed? Which “school,” then should we describe, study, understand. . .*know*? To answer that question we have to articulate what is important. Since

these important objects will enable us to identify which “school” is worth studying and understanding. After all, such a school will be precisely that “school” which serves as the means for achieving these important objects. Thus, if dance is important, the “school” which is illuminating will be that which describes the teaching and learning of dancing, compared to another “school” which is concerned with teaching carpentry. Again, if science is important, then we would find the description of a “school” which has a curriculum of biology, chemistry and physics more significant than another one which exists merely to develop athletes—even if its programme of physical training is very well researched and thought through.

The central case of a school

In other words, the fruitful way to proceed is to describe, study, analyze and understand that *one* “School” (represented with a capital ‘S’) which exists in order to serve well those important ends or objects, whatever these important ends are. This School may or may not exist presently in reality. But its description is no less real. For we can detail its blue-print, and it can then be realized in the concrete. Yet for participants in the business of education, it is this very School which will be significant to know and understand. And it is significant because it will detail, on top of the many things that schools generally do, those *very things this very School will have or do to promote, develop, remedy, protect etc...the important things*. After all, what is important, apart from what is already important of itself, are also the very *means* to achieve these important ends.

Scattered conceptually around and about this School will be other “schools” which share some of its characteristics, but not all. These other schools are no less schools, but they will not be as significant for the social theorist (teachers, educational leaders, policy makers. . .) interested in educational institutions. For compared with the School, these other schools will be defective in servicing the ends that are important in the judgment of the social theorist. So the School stands at the center of the many possible instantiations of what may be a school as its preferred type of school. In relation to all these many various schools, the School is the *ideal*, or the *standard to match*. Let us call this School the *central case*, following a familiar term already applied in jurisprudence. (Ibid.) Thus the central case of a school is merely that school which best instantiates the ideal version of what a school is.

From this it becomes even clearer why our description of the School is significant and illuminating. As it is, this description of the School is at the same time also prescriptive (Finnis, 1998, p. 34). Why is that the case? It is because what we have here is a description of a standard, a preferred type of school. It is what any school *ought to be*. If any school matches it, it would instantiate our ideal. On the other hand, if any school falls away from this School, then such a school would be less desirable, poorer, less perfect, less preferred. And the further a school is from the School, the less desirable it is. In this way we are able to judge, with reference to the School, whether any particular school is a mature, developed, sound, desirable, preferred school or an immature, undeveloped, imperfect, peripheral, corrupt school. And for the latter, we are able to advise and device strategies to *align it towards, craft it in the direction of, reform it and urge it to model itself after the School*. The School, being a central case of a school, is what all other schools in its periphery *look up to*.

Whose values?

So far so good. But there still is one more consideration. Amongst policy makers, teachers, principals, administrators, head of departments, lecturers, professors, social theorists, even students and parents etc. i.e. all the participants and stakeholders of the school, there will be different estimates of what is important. Therefore, it would follow, there will be differing judgments on what a School, designed as it were to promote and defend these important things, would look like. A Professor who thinks highly of the arts would think of a School (or indeed, University) which has some form of artistic programme for its students, or a school which is at least open to having such programmes, pending available resources. An economist or politician, whose primary concern may be the economy, may look to market demands for a judgment on what really is important, and argue that the School should nurture and develop students which will be able to service the demands of the market. A teenager, for whom having pleasurable experiences may be the foremost and only thing on his mind, may be concerned to insist that the School will offer facilities and programmes that will satisfy his appetite for fun and excitement, and exclude in his concept of the School other elements which detract from these experiences. Therefore, *depending on whose judgments* we are to adopt, we will arrive at rather different central cases of a school. Put it another way, depending on *what* these judgments are, so will the School be.

Now some persons have sound judgments of what are important. Others may not. Clearly, we have no reason to consider and take seriously the judgments of those whose estimate of what is important is incorrect and erroneous. Indeed, we have to avoid these judgments. After all, in describing the central case of a school, we are not after a mirage. We are after a school which is truly in its central case, and not one which merely *appears* to be. So we have to be very careful. Not everyone's judgment should be entertained, but only the judgment of those whose grasp of what is important and what is not important is sound and correct.

So whose judgments are we to attend to, with which to craft our School? Naturally, the judgments of those who are *sound* with regard the important and the unimportant—whose judgments stand up to critical scrutiny and reflection, and whose judgments are not whimsical and arbitrary. So we need to identify these people (including ourselves), and expose and disregard those who mistakenly believe themselves to have these sound judgments. And we do that precisely through identifying those sound or unsound judgments these people may have. In this way, by attending to the various judgments and submitting them to critical reflection, we are able in one and the same exercise to surface the sound (or flawed) judgments and the person who has these judgments. For judgments about what is not important can be examined, and those which are reasonable can be identified and adopted, and those which are unreasonable can be exposed and disregarded.

A School open to human rights

What is important?

Following Aristotle and Aquinas, natural law theorist John Finnis suggests that the things and objects that are important are the basic goods. These are the goods, ends,

objects, states of affairs that self-evident practical reasons recognize as valuable in themselves and that are worth seeking. They are the basic goods of life, truthful knowledge, friendship, religion, esthetic experience, skilful play and moral soundness (practical reasonableness). Since reason recognizes an obligation to promote these goods, and these goods are promoted and enjoyed in human beings, then in relation to human beings these are their rights. We can speak, as explained above, of these basic goods as the (general) human rights of persons. So when we speak of “human rights,” we are referring to “the basic goods from the point of view of persons who (generally) deserve the enjoyment of these goods.” In other words, paralleling the Holdfeldian analysis of claim-rights, the talk of one’s *obligation* to promote basic goods in others easily grounds and translates into *rights* discourse (Finnis, 1980, pp. 199–210). This being so I will generally retain the talk of “obligations to promote basic goods” whilst reverting to a rights-based discourse at relevant parts of the essay.

Since I am also inclined at this stage to think natural law theory and its correlating account of natural or human rights sound, I will proceed with its theory of values. Knowledge is good, and is important. So is friendship, and life, as well as religion, or play, or esthetic experience, or practical reasonableness (otherwise moral soundness). For the natural law theorist a school in its central case will be directed, in various ways, to these basic goods: these goods ought to be sought and done and their opposites avoided. I will spend the rest of the essay sketching out what a school, which is attentive to all these basic goods, may look like. Such a sketch will not be exhaustive, but it will at least pick out some salient aspects of such a school.

The *ethos* of the natural law theorists’ School

Let me start by pointing out what cannot be done. We cannot detail exactly the one right way or ways such a school will exist. This is because, even for the central case, some details cannot be articulated. Consider our central case of a school. Our school will see to the basic goods. Through its teaching and curriculum, we may say that it will steer its programme towards the promotion of basic goods in the students (but not merely students, but also in relation to employees, teachers etc.). Hence the subjects and programmes it offers should be those which may develop skills and capacities that enable students at present and in the future to live well, develop deep and lasting friendships, and communicate and know the truth. But what kinds of books to use, how big classrooms should be, where toilets should be located—these will depend on other facts such as resources available, the kinds of students one has, and the architectural structure of the premises. These things will inevitably vary from school to school. What can be articulated, perhaps, is a kind of *ethos*—the attitudinal stance or practical posture—of that school (see McLaughline, 2005). The *ethos* will, of course, determine how the school will turn out.

An *ethos* of openness

I will begin by arguing for the *ethos* of the school in its central case, before illustrating such a school with examples. If we think that all these basic goods are indeed goods, or important, then my suggestion is that there will be a fundamental *ethos of openness towards all of these goods* (or, fully synonymously: an *ethos of openness towards human rights*). Hence there will not be any (unreasonable) denial of the importance of any of these goods, through suggesting that any particular good is not important

and not worthy of our consideration for integrating into the school structure and its activities. Nor can there be any theoretical attempt to suggest that we should prefer one good over another (and so justifiably ignore one for the other). This is because there is no way to commensurate these unique goods, and judge that one is better than another. They are all *uniquely* attractive. The consequence of this is explained by Finnis:

“...there must be no leaving out of account, or arbitrary discounting or exaggeration, of any of the basic human values. Any commitment to a coherent plan of life is going to involve some degree of concentration on one or some of the basic forms of good, at the expense, temporarily or permanently, of other forms of good. But the commitment will be rational only if it is on the basis of one’s capacities, circumstances, and even of one’s tastes. It will be unreasonable if it is on the basis of the devaluation of any of the basic forms of human excellence, or if it is on the basis of an overvaluation of such merely derivative and supporting or instrumental goods such as wealth or ‘opportunity’ or of such merely secondary or conditionally valuable goods such as reputation or... pleasure. A certain scholar may have little taste or capacity for friendship, and may feel that life for him would have no savour if he were prevented from pursuing his commitment to knowledge. Nonetheless it would be unreasonable for him to deny that, objectively, human life (quite apart from truth-seeking and knowledge) and friendship are good in themselves. It is one thing to have little capacity and even no ‘taste’ for scholarship, or friendship, or physical heroism, or sanctity; it is quite another things, and stupid or arbitrary, to think and speak or act as if these were not real forms of goods” (Finnis, 1980, p. 105).

Hence when considering what to teach or to include in our curriculum, subjects which are useful for promoting or developing capacities in our students to participate in any and all of these goods will be given consideration, and not willfully ignored, insofar as the pursuit of any one of these goods is not willfully ignored. This posture or ethos of openness is in fact a posture of openness to human rights. Conversely, when there is the wilful suppression of these basic goods—an ethos of disrespect for these goods—then here we have a case of a school which fails to respect human rights.

Art and music in the curriculum

If we think that *esthetic experience* is important, we may be very open to including in our curriculum (and take seriously, not merely give lip-service to) esthetic education. This may be realized through art courses or music lessons for instance. Now one may not offer such classes because one *cannot*, for lack of time, resources or appropriate teachers, or other logistical limitations. Indeed, if we are to coordinate a school day, or term or week, and given that each day is but a certain number of hours, and students have only a limited number of days, weeks and months with us, we cannot possibly do everything, and offer every good programme. When we offer something in dance, we may have to give up art, or drama. Or if we decide to do science experiments or play sport for the week, art will necessarily have to be neglected.

But saying that we cannot offer these is one thing. And this is not the same as saying that one *will not* consider and offer these courses, even if time and resources are available. The first is a posture of openness to these goods, limited nonetheless by realistic considerations. The second is an unreasonable and principled rejection of

these goods as goods. A school which has the latter (unsound) ethos, may have the culture of despising an education in the esthetics. It will articulate (one may imagine) and share notions that cultural and art lessons are time wasted, absolutely speaking—unless such lessons may translate into benefits for other basic goods, such as life (through enabling one to secure a good job, more money etc.). Such a posture is one that is disrespectful of the basic good of esthetic experience, and is hence directly contrary to the (general) human right to this good.

Philosophy and the Raffles programme: an ethnographic case study

Another example of a school with an ethos of openness is the following. A school which takes seriously the intrinsic (and not merely instrumental) value of *knowledge* will be open to programmes which promote knowledge for its own sake.

Raffles Girls School (Secondary) (RGSS) in Singapore has offered the Raffles Programme since the 1980s, which integrates philosophical learning as an aspect of its compulsory curriculum. Now what is interesting to me is that in its philosophical vision, it explained the need for philosophical education not merely in instrumental terms but with a view to nurturing students who are “Thinkers”. Thus the prospectus (2000) writes that “through [the] Raffles Philosophy Course, [students] will be nurtured into a community of inquirers with strong empathy and well-honed reasoning and dialoguing skills.” My own conversations with Mrs. Shirley Tan, the Deputy-principal of RGSS led me to believe that their educational aim in having philosophy is so that students can learn to become independent, critical thinkers, and this was something considered valuable in itself. Now there is no denying that a capacity to think well is *useful* for a whole lot of other expedient affairs—not least so that when the child graduates to Raffles Junior College she can do well in Knowledge and Inquiry (KI) (a new and prestigious offering for able junior college students), with all its academic and *career* implications. And the prospectus does indicate that this is one motivation, since it explains that the programme will be aligned with the KI course to be offered at the Junior College level. Nonetheless, there are reasons to believe that the vision of the Raffles Programme and its related philosophical education is not merely for that; what is valued includes a capacity to reflect critically (and hence, to know the truth) just in itself. There is strong evidence that the ethos, shared and communicated by the leadership of its principal, is the ethos of a fundamental openness to truthful knowledge, understood as something intrinsically valuable.

When one examines the philosophy curriculum this judgment becomes even more suggestive. Students doing philosophy study not merely critical thinking but (to the extent that they can) also a little of philosophical metaphysics, which deals with speculative truths regarding ultimate reality. When I was teaching Philosophy as a member of their Philosophy Centre in 2004 and 2005, the curriculum included discussions of God, the metaphysics of determinism and freedom and Cartesian skepticism. Now for some this kind of knowledge is not useful—but this is precisely, even if paradoxically, its virtue. For some knowledge is worth knowing for its own sake, even if it does not produce something external to the knower in the end. While philosophy teachers (like myself) often (are compelled to) explain and demonstrate the relevance of philosophical thinking, it may not be altogether a bad thing, I suggest, that some philosophical learning be left irrelevant, and students are invited to know just for its own sake. This kind of pedagogical response to charges of irrelevance seems to me consistent with a sound stance of openness to the intrinsic worth of truth.

In any case, my point is this: in the case of the good of truthful knowledge, a school which has some form of philosophical component or programme suggests that it has a sound ethos of openness with respect to the intrinsic importance of knowledge. In the case of RGSS, there are indicators of this ethos. This ethos I call the “community of inquiry” ethos, a phrase I have adopted from the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement. This is because the P4C movement’s concerted effort to craft communities of inquiry in schools is consistent with the basic premise and attitudinal stance that philosophical knowledge sought for its own sake is valuable.

By contrast, a school ethos which is unsound would reject as pointless and a complete waste of time, such programmes. For them, the question is not one of resources; rather, theirs is a principled stance misinformed by the erroneous and flawed vision of what is important and worth promoting and pursuing. Such a stand is not consistent with the general human right to truthful knowledge.

Should not schools study theology or religion?

To date, few secondary schools in Singapore offer theology, apart from the Catholic mission schools, which offer courses in Biblical Studies or World Religions. But let me focus on the higher educational institutions, and what is said of it can also be applied to the pre-college institutions. None of our major universities (National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU)) offer theology, nor do any of them have a religious studies department, even though NUS offers a religious studies minor. Should this change? Can a central case of a school or educational institution suffer this scenario? It does depend on the kind of resources, purposes and strategic emphasis each university has. Perhaps the burden of securing and seeing to the basic goods may be instrumentally shared amongst the major universities. But where funds allow, and if *religion* (the understanding of some overarching meaning or purpose to our existence) is an important basic good, then the educational institution should be open to its pursuit, development and learning. Perhaps this openness can be expressed explicitly through the establishment of a theological faculty, or a religious studies department. At least, this seems to be a sound policy proposal when crafting a higher educational institution in its central case.

Other policy applications

Evaluation and ranking of schools

Earlier in the article, it was mentioned that the description of the school in its central case is both descriptive and *prescriptive*. And this is because such a School is the standard, the ideal type around which falters other peripheral, undeveloped, defective instantiations of what a school is. I want to bring this conclusion to bear on policies regarding ranking and evaluation of schools.

For quite some time now we have ranked schools, and this is of course useful. Comparing schools gives us an idea of which is a better school and how I could, in relation to that standard, improve my school. Yet in evaluating and ranking schools, should not the criteria be nothing other than the school in its central case? Indeed it should be, since the central case of a school is the objective standard, the best case and most sound instance of what a school is. But for a long time now schools ranking

criteria has been dominated by academic results, which is of course important. Results give an indication of how well students have been educated, and the central case of a school will certainly feature good academic results—and more. For the central case of a school will have, as I have argued, the sound ethos of openness to the basic goods, and hence will exhibit *relevant expressions (and hence indications of the presence) of this ethos*. Given that some schools offering the integrated programmes no longer offer the O-levels, perhaps the consideration of school ethos (variously measured) becomes an even more important criterion in evaluating and comparing schools.

While a detailed methodology for measuring and evaluating school ethos remains to be worked out, my sense is that measurements would be made using strategies in anthropological research. The researcher will spend some time integrating himself or herself fully into the daily lives of the school participants, and record attitudes and judgments reflected through words, statements and gestures of all involved (in the running of) the school. They will then use that data and develop an interpretation of the ethos, and evaluate that ethos in comparison with that of a school in its central case.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the central case of a school should embody an ethos of openness towards the basic goods. From this description I proposed policy for evaluating, ranking and developing educational institutions, and focused on the merit of philosophy and theology departments in educational institutions. There are other implications that can be drawn or merit further research, but are not developed here. I will just mention one proposal which can be controversial. Briefly, if a school is to adopt an openness to the intrinsic good of life, then arguably it cannot endorse ideas and acts which promote the “culture of death,” which is the disregard for the human right to life. And if the culture of death is instantiated through intentional acts of killing or suppression of human life in certain medical and sexual acts (such as euthanasia, abortion, embryonic stem-cell research procedures or contraceptive sexuality), then schools cannot endorse the dissemination of ideas that speak well of such acts or neutralize the unreasonableness of these acts (see Finnis, 1991). Nor should it train students to realize their intention to kill. Even less should it train students to kill others by killing oneself in the process. As it is, every deliberate intention to kill a human life (one’s own or someone else’s) is an intention to violate ‘the obligation to promote life and never harm it,’ which translates logically under rights discourse as ‘the human right to life’ (Finnis, 1980, 1998).

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