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The Person-Centred School

Michael Fielding

Abstract

The fourth article we are highlighting from the extensive *FORUM* archive introduces Michael Fielding's critique of practice and policy for school effectiveness, first published in 2000. In it, Fielding describes the disillusionment with New Labour education policies before setting out a well-made argument for the person-centred school to promote human fulfilment.

Keywords: person-centred, community, Macmurray, school effectiveness

Introduced by Jane Martin

When Michael Fielding was moved to write this piece, a New Labour government under privately educated Prime Minister Tony Blair had placed education at the centre of the policy stage. Policies of the moment were aimed at: remedying the neglect and omissions of previous Conservative administrations (notably the Conservatives' withering public spending cuts); issues of school improvement; raising educational 'achievement'. A favoured mantra was 'standards, not structures' and the significance of constancy in policy terms had been made explicit in Labour's 1997 election manifesto: 'Some things the Conservatives got right. We will not change them.' All of which signalled comprehensive education did not have New Labour's unequivocal support.

Michael Fielding, then a Reader in Education at the University of Sussex, articulates in the article his distrust of the way in which the contemporary 'effective school' movement sought to take the notion of community to itself, not because it valued it for the sake of those who make up that community, but to make use of the notion of community for its own ends. Targets became the be-all and end-all for teachers and students as the 'performance' of the school and its perceived 'effectiveness' became focused on narrow, mechanistic objectives that were alienating rather than engaging, but which seemed to be in keeping with Blair's emphasis on 'what works' over ideology. This modernising vision of learning organisations has more in common with an emphasis on instilling discipline and responsibility than it does with making learning communities. In such a vision, the people the school is allegedly there to serve only matter insofar as they contribute towards the school's productivity.

Michael Fielding urges us to pull back from the seductive model of the 'effective

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and performing' school and, in common with the philosopher John Macmurray, to think about education as if people mattered. Fielding, like many others, is disturbed by ideas of educational 'performance' and 'performativity' that focus on testing and getting pupils exam-ready alongside the use of indicators, benchmarks and targets to drive reform. He worries about the impact on the many committed learners and teachers who find themselves trying to ape qualities that connote power and success within a social context devoid of attention to substantive, structural reasons for "failure". His person-centred framework for teaching and learning suggests why key elements of an educational programme focussed on performance, productivity and profitability is a political failure that is, in essence, a failure of the imagination. His analysis remains perceptive and timely.

Essentially person-centred in his life and principles, Michael Fielding shows us how we might challenge the apparently inexorable neoliberal narrative used to project an ideology of extreme competition and individualism that pits us against one another. His article shows how we might instead put the person at the heart of the school community, to flourish as part of a vibrant participatory culture that breaks with what has taken precedence in English schools. We have here a repository of ideas for re-imagining not only educational futures but also education for democracy.

Never was that more important than now when, as Naomi Klein argues, the coronavirus crisis could, like earlier crises, be a catalyst by which governments shower aid on the wealthiest in our society, including those responsible for our current vulnerabilities, while offering next to nothing for the most disadvantaged, for whom the probability increases that they will be worst hit. This connects to an unfolding tragedy that includes damage to mental health among school-aged children, lost access to learning for the majority of state school pupils in contrast to the minority of private school children, and current inaction over providing ventilation in state schools across the summer. We can and must act now to reverse this and rebuild society in new and beneficial ways. Attention to the person, and to a humanitarian view of education, is a good place to start.

The Person Centred School

Introduction

Why is there such disillusionment amongst so many involved in education at a time when a still hugely popular government has insistently and persistently proclaimed education as its main priority? Why have we ended up in a situation where, in the words of one commentators, 'we have ... six year olds being coached for SATS in the name of improvement, ... parents haranguing teachers for not giving their children enough homework ... and teenagers who just stop going to school' (Moore, 2000, p17). Why, in the words of another writing some 70 years ago is it still the case that 'We have immense power, and immense resources we worship efficiency and success; and 'we do not know how to live finely?' (Macmurray, 1935, p76) [my italics]. There are, of course, many answers to these questions, some of which have been explored in an engaging and properly demanding way in an ongoing *FORUM* debate (Halpin, 1999; Hill, 2000; Rikowski, 2000) about the usefulness and validity of the Third Way and its application to education.

This article suggests a slightly different way of coming at some of the issues central to our current dilemmas. It begins by raising fundamental questions that current preoccupations with school effectiveness and the raising of standards either marginalise or ignore altogether. It suggests that unless these bedrock questions are tackled more seriously and more intelligently, education policy and practice will remain a prisoner of a superficial set of understandings and aspirations. They will therefore fail profoundly in their attempt to meet our needs as human beings struggling into the twenty-first century. We need a more explicit, more adequate understanding of how we become persons: without it, no amount of commitment and goodwill will achieve an educational provision that inspires commitment and achieves what is intended. We also need a different intellectual framework that not only helps us to understand why current approaches are flawed but also one that helps us build better alternatives. We need to know both why school effectiveness is bound to fail and what other possibilities are more likely to succeed.

On the necessity of education: having a view of how we become persons

My starting point, then, is the view that we develop as human beings in and through our relations with others. Primarily, we are neither individualistic nor social in our nature: rather, we are communal beings whose individuality and development as persons is realised in certain kinds of relations with others. Basically there are two kinds of relations through which we develop our humanity. They are *functional* or task-centred relations and *personal* or person-centred relations. As we shall see, both are necessary

and interdependent, but one is more important than the other.

In functional relations we relate to other people in terms of roles and specific purposes. Thus, for example, when I buy, say, a train ticket or various items from a shop, my relation with the person in the ticket office or the shop is defined by the purchase of the ticket or the items for sale. In such encounters we do not generally exchange profound thoughts about of our experience of the world or reveal ourselves in all our variety and complexity: when we have completed our purchase/sale the relationship ends. These kinds of relations and exchanges are characteristic of the day-to-day interactions; it is these functional relations that comprise society (as opposed to community) and make up the reality of economic, social and political life.

This aspectival or partial revelation of ourselves is not, however, true of personal relations. Personal relations, relations in which we can be and become persons, are important basically because it is these kinds of relations that provide the conditions in which we feel safe enough and significant enough and valued enough to be challenged and stimulated to develop our emergent humanity. It is in personal relations, in relations of community (rather than society), characterised by the principles of freedom and equality within the context of care, that we can be and become most fully ourselves, most fully human. Here our relations with others are open and expansive as, for example, in friendship. Friendship is not task specific: we are not friends in order to get certain things done. Indeed, if we approach friendship in this way e.g. to gain access to certain things or positions we think are desirable, we are using the appearance of friendship for purposes that are corrosive of its development.

Understanding the relationship between society & community

The interconnectedness of functional and personal relations is very important, and it is here we find the centre of the problems we are currently facing, not just in education, but it many aspects of our lives. There are two main points to be made here. First, functional and personal relations are at once opposites, inseparable and essential to one another in human affairs. The second main point is that whilst the functional (social/economic/political) and the personal (the communal) are necessarily interconnected, they are not of equal importance. Understanding their essential relationship is essential if we are to work out why things are going so badly wrong at the moment and develop a way forward that is likely to be both positive and creative.

What then can we say about which one has priority over the other, why this is the case, and in what circumstances can those priorities be realised? Answers to these difficult questions can most readily found in the writings of one of the most outstanding neglected British philosophers of the twentieth century, John Macmurray, from whose work this line of thinking is drawn. Macmurray argues unequivocally that 'The

functional life is for the personal life ... the personal life is through the functional life' (Macmurray, 1941, p822). In other words, personal relations (i.e. relations like those of friendship, family and community where we relate to each other as persons rather than as role occupants or job holders) are fundamentally important in at least two ways. First, they precede in a temporal sense our emergence as social beings. Secondly, and more importantly, they provide the point and purpose of functional relations. Community is prior to social, economic and political life in the sense that their justification, their legitimacy and point are dependent upon whether or not they do in fact enable personal and communal relations to develop between us. It thus raises the most profound and subversive question of all; that is to say, 'What are our social, economic and political arrangements *for*?'

There is one further important point to consider before we come to examine Macmurray's wider significance for our current dilemmas. As we have seen in our earlier examination of the relationship between the functional and the personal, Macmurray argues that 'the personal life is *through* the functional life'. I would want to augment and extend this line of thinking and argue that not only is the functional for the sake of the personal, and the personal through the functional, but the influence of the personal on the functional is transformative of it; the functional should be *expressive of* the personal; the means should themselves be transformed by the ends by which they are inspired and towards which they are aiming. In other words, the functional ways in which we work together in schools to achieve personal, communal and educational ends should be transformed by the moral and interpersonal character and quality of what we are trying to do. For example, there are communication systems in schools which are largely mechanistic and impersonal, which provide no space for dialogue, which are primarily about a top-down imposition of authority, which are expressed in language that is metallic and monochrome, and which operate largely independently of the uniqueness and vibrancy of the human beings to whom they are directed. There are other communication systems that are person-centred, that encourage dialogue, that are about the development of shared responsibility, that are imaginative and richly textured in their discourse, and that are dependent on the mutual commitment of those who are parties to the mutuality of the educational process. In the first instance, the functional operates independently of the personal; indeed, it verges on being anti-personal: in the second, the functional is itself informed by the personal ends which animate and justify its existence.

On the need for a new intellectual framework

The significance of Macmurray's work within our current context seems to me to have at least three dimensions to it. First, he reminds us that since education is immediately

and ultimately about becoming more fully human it must be linked to a view of human being and becoming; it must rest upon a view about how we become persons. Secondly, he reminds us that all the activity and busyness of our daily lives, all the arrangements, structures and practices we develop are only justifiable insofar as they do actually help us to become better persons: in other words he reminds us of the fundamental importance of purposes. Thirdly, he also reminds us that the success or otherwise of our efforts to achieve those human purposes are themselves dependent on the moral and existential quality of the means we adopt: that is to say, how we go about achieving our intentions matters a great deal.

I have indicated the kinds of answers Macmurray gives to these three fundamental questions. The point is not whether one is necessarily in agreement with him. What is crucial is that they are recognised as significant questions in the field of education and that our current policies and practices have some kind of answer to them. Only then can we move ahead in ways that are likely to be fruitful. In order to take the debate forward, I set out below an intellectual typology that I hope will assist that process.

The typology itself is based upon the two fundamental forms of human association about which I have been arguing, the functional and the personal. What it then seeks to do is work through different orientations towards them and in so doing try to understand more clearly than we do at the moment how these four approaches to education and schooling differ and what some of the consequences of those differences are in approaches to teaching and learning. In particular, it tries to grasp more securely why the current vogue for school effectiveness is inappropriate. And, insofar as it is intended as an educational strategy, as opposed to a narrowly instrumental and strikingly dreary approach to schooling, is bound to fail. It also seeks to advocate a more compelling alternative, namely the person-centred school, which retains a commitment to achieving desirable results, but in ways which are rich in their humanity and wide-ranging and creative in their achievement.

Figure 1 below sets out the four basic orientations, (severally called 'impersonal', 'sentimental', 'person-centred', and 'high performance'), towards a number of different questions, the most fundamental of which concerns how the orientation sees the relationship between the functional and the personal.

Schools as impersonal organisations

The first two orientations, namely the impersonal and the sentimental, take diametrically opposed stances on the relation between the functional and the personal. The impersonal standpoint marginalises the personal. The impersonal school is a mechanistic organisation that is primarily concerned with efficiency. People's desire to relate to each other as persons or to work together as a community are seen as

largely irrelevant and almost certainly either a waste of time or destructive of the drive to achieve outcomes. With regard to teaching and learning, teachers operating within the impersonal framework typically see themselves as teaching subjects not students; motivation is primarily through appeal to the importance of a particular subject and the standards internal to it; content is tightly controlled by the teacher, with insignificant room for negotiation: in sum, the teacher operates largely as a highly skilled pedagogic technician.

Schools as **Impersonal** Organisations	Schools as **Sentimental** Communities	Schools as **Person-Centred** Communities	Schools as **High Performance** Organisations
The Functional Marginalises the Personal	*The Personal Marginalises the Functional*	*The Functional is for the Sake of/ Expressive of the Personal*	*The Personal is Used for the Sake of the Functional*
Mechanistic Organisation	Self-indulgent Community	Learning Community	Learning Organisation
Community is Unimportant / Destructive of Organisational Purposes	Community has no Organisational Consequence or Requirements	Organisation Exists to Promote Community	Community is a Useful Tool to Achieve Organisational Purposes
Efficient	Complacent	Morally and instrumentally Successful	Efficient

Figure 1. The organisational orientation of schools: understanding the relation between functions and persons

Schools as Sentimental Communities

In contrast, the sentimental standpoint valorises the personal at the expense of the functional. It has little time or patience for the functional or organisational arrangements needed to translate the warmth and deeply held emotional commitments into practical realities that help young people to learn in a variety of ways. Consequently, it is ineffectual in what it tries to do. It is sentimental in the sense that whilst the value commitments that drive its daily work are concerned with emotional well-being they lack any tangible means of demonstrating the sincerity of those commitments through reciprocally demanding action and evaluation. It is a self-indulgent community

in the sense that its concern for persons and for the wider dimensions of human achievement are overstated and under-realised, often leading to a complacency and self-regard that obstructs rather than enhances the learning of students, staff or the community it serves. With regard to teaching and learning, teachers operating within the sentimental framework typically see themselves as teaching students not subjects; motivation is primarily through appeal to the student's own best past performance, without any reference to the achievements of others, and there is often exhortation and encouragement which centres largely on the importance of not letting the teacher down; content is fluid and emergent, but interconnections and coherence remain largely elusive or circumstantial: in sum, the teacher operates in ways that are very close to certain kinds of therapy with a marked preference for concentrating on learning, sometimes to the virtual exclusion of teaching.

Schools as performance organisations

The third and fourth orientations, namely the person-centred school and the high-performance school, share a commitment to young people's achievement, but take very different stances towards how that achievement is conceived and how it is best realised in the context of a school. The *high-performance* school takes an opportunist approach to the emergence of the appallingly, if appropriately, named human resource management and the rise of emotional labour strategies (Smith, 1999). Here Macmurray's advocacy is turned on its head and instead of the functional being for the sake of the personal, the personal is used for the sake of the functional. In many respects this orientation reflects the preoccupations and practices of the effective school and, within business and industry, the learning organisation. Here community is valued, but primarily for instrumental purposes within the context of the market-place: in the case of schools this means performance in local and/or national league tables which is not only 'good' but seen to be so. The significance of both students and teachers rests primarily in their contribution to the public performance of the organisation; hence its form of unity is collective, rather than personal and communal.

This last point about the incidental or derivative significance of the human beings who comprise the school as a learning organisation highlights one of the fundamental flaws of the school effectiveness model as it has developed in the national and international context of the education marketplace. Basically, the collective model is totalitarian in its intellectual origins and, thus, unsurprisingly, in at least some of its consequences, whether intended or otherwise. For this reason, the realities that field data are beginning to reveal point to an emerging picture of human experience in which on the one hand students complain that their school only regards them as important insofar as they are bearers of A* grades (Fielding, 1999) or on the other that they are, in

the frightening words of one primary school pupil, 'a nothing' (Reah & Wiliam, 1999). Teachers, too, are subject to exactly the same pressures and covert messages: their significance is now to be judged in terms of performance, more often than not related to practices that translate most readily into the public nexus of the market, and their professionalism subsumed into an increasingly ubiquitous list of generic competencies that marginalise judgement and prescribe a predictable practice, undeviating in its confidence and its collectivity.

With regard to teaching and learning, teachers operating within the high performance framework see their main task as getting results; motivation is primarily competitive, with an insistent reference to the importance (for the school as much as for the student) of measurable outcomes; and whilst content is tightly controlled by the teacher (or school/government policy), there is a substantial commitment to engendering 'ownership' in students: in sum, the teacher operates largely as a highly skilled persuader with an overriding emphasis on 'what works'.

The high-performance model of school organisation which I am suggesting school effectiveness most readily exemplifies, has another serious flaw which is, again, derived from its over-emphasis on measurable results. Here it is not just that the increasingly corporate orientation of schools inevitably reduces the significance of individual human beings to parasitic status, it is also that the collective pressure to achieve certain kinds of results and be seen to do so, marginalises concerns about the moral, aesthetic and interpersonal quality of the way the results are actually achieved.

Insofar as it exemplifies its ideological thrust and the dynamic of its wider political and economic contexts, school effectiveness must inevitably fail as an educational undertaking, as distinct from an economically driven model of schooling. It will fail precisely because the specifically educational character of its language and concerns are either eradicated altogether or transformed into a discourse which has no significant capacity to comprehend, let alone encourage, the richness, the unpredictability and the liveliness that give education its validity and value.

Schools as person-centred communities

In contrast to its high-performance counterpart, the person-centred school sees the relationship between the functional and the personal in a Macmurrayesque way. For such a school the functional is both for the sake of and expressive of the personal. It goes beyond a learning organisation to become a learning community. Here organisation has an important part to play, but one in which the structures and procedures that support the daily realities of its work, promote community, rather than deny it or use it for purposes of corporate success. The person-centred school also goes beyond the effectiveness of the high-performance model. Its outcomes are widely and imaginatively conceived, and

its success is as satisfying morally and interpersonally as it is instrumentally. Its form of unity is communal and person-centred, rather than collective and outcomes driven. Its language transcends the bullet point banalities of the effectiveness imperative, celebrating nuance as well as number, delight as well as definition.

With regard to teaching and learning, teachers operating within the person-centred framework typically take the view that teaching subjects or getting results is only justifiable if it does actually help students to become better persons; motivation is at once ipsative, emulative and rooted in negotiation; that is to say, it not only appeals to the student's own best past performance, but also to the delight in the creativity and excellence of others, and is given meaning through a reciprocal commitment to dialogue and mutual respect as the driving force of educative encounter. Content is thus discussed at appropriate points and joint decisions are made in the light of them; in sum, the teacher operates as an educator of persons. Such an approach rests on the assumption that real human achievement can only be attained, understood and demonstrated if means and ends are seen as mutually reinforcing and that for this to happen our modes of understanding, our systems that seek to make them a reality, and the language that shapes the form and quality of both, must develop in appropriately rich and dynamic ways.

Conclusion

Things cannot continue as they are. Despite its overconfident tone and the superficial plausibility of its hands-on advocacy, effectiveness ideology is as barren as it is belligerent. If the preoccupation with outcomes becomes increasingly myopic and insistent then teachers will become little more than cultural operatives and students, mere units of economic production. The language of education will become even more dull and devoid of feeling: it will no longer sing to us and inspire us: it will reduce the poetry of human being and becoming to nothing more than a series of eminently clear but ultimately meaningless bullet points. The supreme irony in all this is that our proficiency and productivity will turn out to be either pointless or destructive or both: pointless because we will no longer have the language or the inclination to ask what productivity is for; destructive because in ceasing to ask these fundamental questions those with power and position will provide answers for us, answers which we are bound to accept since we might well have surrendered our capacity to think and act differently. The size of a nation's gross national product should not be bought at the price of boredom or servitude.

It is time we sought alternatives to the impoverishment and disillusionment of performativity. The typology I have explored here offers one way of understanding why the imperative of performance is, despite goodwill, good intentions and much effort,

an inevitable if unwitting betrayal of education. It is intellectually shallow, spiritually destitute and corrosive of much that is central to human fulfilment. The person-centred school offers a viable alternative that many teachers, parents, students and others involved in education are beginning to explore with growing confidence and hope: why not join them?

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