Learning to be a person and a practical example

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Introduction

This paper is in two parts. The first part claims that education, in its primary evaluative meaning, is concerned with 'learning to be a person', and therefore requires analysis of what it means to be a person and to become one 'more fully'. The second part illustrates this practically by reference to a national project, 'Family Links', which works with learners in schools and with their parents, as they develop essential personal qualities and skills.

I

On being a person

Education and 'personhood'

There is a tendency to treat 'education' as a package of processes pursued in order to acquire something else – qualifications or a better job. It is seen as a means to an end. One asks 'Where were you educated?' with the expected answer to refer to the name of a school or university. But such an answer leaves open the possibility of saying that it was not a good education or indeed (to use the words of John Dewey) a 'mis-education'. Lurking behind the descriptive use of 'education' is an evaluative sense of what one means by an 'educated person'. The question posed, therefore, by the Nuffield Review was 'What counts as an educated 19 year-old in this day and age?'[1] – a question rarely asked in the many educational 'reforms' we have witnessed.

First, a person is a physical object which you can measure and weigh – subject to the laws of physical science. But the objects which are picked out by the concept of 'person' are more than that. They have qualities and capacities which cannot exhaustively be spelt out in terms of the attributes of physical objects as such. Persons, not tables and chairs, have a form of consciousness – concepts through which physical world is organised and made sense of.

Second, that making sense of experience (its conceptualisation) is not passive in the way that a camera records snapshots of the physical world. There is a purposeful interaction with that world, attributing meaning to events, anticipating what is to happen. Hence, we attribute to persons *intentionality,* and thus there is a different kind of explanation of their (and others') behaviour from that of physical causation, namely, one in terms of intentions and motives.

Third, the form of consciousness through which a person makes sense of the world must itself contain the concept of 'person' – the recognition of other 'physical objects' as having the attributes of consciousness and intentionality. Without such a developed sense, it would not be possible to interact with other persons and communicate with them in a person-like way. Communication assumes what the philosopher John Macmurray referred to as 'the form of the personal'[2].

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[1] Pring. R., *et al.*, 2009, *Education for All: the future of education and training for 14-19 year olds,* London: Routledge.

[2] Macmurray, J., 1961, *Persons in Relation,* London: Faber and Faber

Finally, such a concept of a person (both of others and of oneself as persons) contains moral attributes. To be angry with someone assumes that he or she is *responsible* for doing something which is seen to be wrong. Moral appraisals are an indispensable part of our relationships with other persons in which elements of trust, honesty and concern seem to be necessary.

It is important to be reminded of these characteristics because it is too often forgotten that people are persons and to be treated and respected as such. Indeed, the very language of educational discourse reflects such forgetfulness, as 'education' is shaped by measurable *targets*, checked by *performance indicators* through regular *audits,* and *delivered* by teachers in order to satisfy the *customers*. Embedded in this language of performance management is a new science, not just of teaching, but of 'deliverology', leading to the establishment in the U.S of a National Delivery Unit. The learners are sacrificed to the ends which are set elsewhere (e.g. by the government) and to the need of the school in its attempt to ride up the league table. Such language of 'education' creates the context for a more behaviourist approach to learning, including social and moral learning, rather than a development of what is embryonically within the young persons.

Development as a person

The above characteristics of 'being a person' – namely, having forms of consciousness, intentionality, recognition of others as person and moral responsibility – might well be present at a very early age. Infants are persons (though one might debate whether new-born babies are already or only potentiallly persons). They have these elements. But they are much in need of development.

It is necessary, then, to explain what I mean by development:

- Changes take place which can be described in stages, though the demarcations might well be fuzzy at the edges;
- Such 'stages' are more adequate restructurings of the modes of thinking or functioning at the previous stage;
- This process of development can be either ended or thwarted at any stage (we talk of 'stunted growth') or, on the contrary, helped and enhanced through planned interactions with others – for example, a teacher.

Much of that early development arises from interactions with immediate family. But formal *education* (as opposed to mere training) would seek to enhance those attributes – that is: to extend and deepen the different forms of thinking through which we have come to understand the physical, social and moral worlds we inhabit; to shift from an egocentric way of understanding the intentions and motives of others; to come to see others as valuable ends in themselves rather than as means to serve one's own ends; and to come to realise how oneself and others have responsibility for one's actions and preferred way of life.

These attributes and their development are by not discrete. They are aspects of the 'form of the personal', the developments of which inter-relate. For example, development of moral responsibility is enhanced by the acquisition of a more sophisticated moral language through which one comes to see one's actions and aspirations in a different light. Bernard Crick argued that 'political literacy' was a necessary (though by no means a sufficient) condition for the development of a sense of citizenship[3]. Failure to see the distinction between jealousy and envy or failure to recognise patience as a virtue affects one's moral appraisal. Coming to see different groups of people as 'persons' (different ethnic groups, for example) is not unrelated to greater understanding; people from different races have in the past been treated as non-persons: slaves were by definition bits of property.

Much has been written about these different areas of development:

Piaget describes the transition from 'ego-centrism' to 'altruism', whereby one recognises that the motives and understandings of another may be different from one's own, a capacity which can be more or less strong. Or, even if the capacity is there, there may be lacking the tendency to exercise it in certain situations. Communication breaks down, even between teacher and pupil, through failure to grasp the fact that others may not see things as one does oneself.[4]

Richard Peters briefly mapped out the qualitative change in the relationships which people can have with one another. In very early years ('pre-rational' and then 'ego-centric') the child might not recognise that others see things differently. People are appraised in self-referential terms. Later the child reaches the stage of 'realism' in which others are seen to have distinctive roles and points of view. Later still (the stage of 'autonomy') does one come to recognise the individuality of a person's point of view – what the other has worked out for himself, enabling one to relate to that person not instrumentally but as a unique individual[5].

Kohlberg focused specifically on moral development where this was identified with acquiring the sense of justice and acting from principle rather than from whim or mere feeling. That acquisition could be traced from the 'pre-conventional level' (seeing what is right in terms of self-interest or in avoidance of punishment), through the 'conventional level' (what is right being associated with the conventional norms of the wider group whether that of family, peers or society as a whole) to the 'post-conventional level' (where 'right' is that which conforms to universalisable principles – 'do unto others what you would wish they do unto you'. Many remain at the conventional level, and it often requires much prompting for people to transcend such and to develop the moral autonomy whereby they can challenge the conventional wisdom of their social group[6].

Key, therefore, to this development of a person are:

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[3] Crick, B. and Porter, A., 1978, *Political Education and Political Literacy,* Harlow: Longman.

[4] Piaget, J. 1926, *The Language and Thought of the Child,* London: RKP

[5] Peters, R., 1974, 'Personal understanding and personal relations', in Miscel, T., *Understanding Other Persons,* Oxford: Blackwells

[6] Kohlberg, L., 1971, 'Stages of moral development as a basis for education', in Beck, C. *et al, Moral Education Interdisciplinary Approaches,* University of Toronto Press.

- the growing capacity to see others (as well as oneself) as persons with minds, feelings and interests of their own;
- the tendency to relate to them as persons – ends in themselves, not as means to one's personal aspirations;
- entering into personal relationships which reflect that understanding and tendency;
- having the judgement to take responsibility for one's actions (developing a sense of autonomy).

Much more could be said about this notion of development – for example, Selman's charting of the growing ability to appreciate the perspective of another[7], or Loevinger's mapping the growth of self-concept ('ego development') – so important in the development of self-confidence and self-respect[8]. As Peters said, 'where id was, ego shall be'. But the main point is that the attributes of 'the form of the personal' develop, each stage being a transformation of an earlier one, such that one can truly speak of 'growing as a person' – becoming more fully a person.

At the same time, such development can get stuck; it needs the appropriate social ambiance and encouragement. For example, it requires the acquisition of the appropriate ideas and concepts. Kohlberg found that no amount of sophistication in discussing controversial issues in terms of principles, howsoever high the level of reasoning, necessarily led to the learners behaving in a principled way. There remained a dissonance between thought and action. The thinking had to be allied to real and practical situations. It needed to be developed within communities which themselves had incorporated these principles in their dealings with the learners. Hence, the need for what were referred to as 'just community schools'[9].

The following elements in these deliberations and social interactions might be summarised thus:

- exposure to possible conflict over real issues within the class or school community;
- trying to understand the source of conflict from the other's point of view;
- considering the rival points of view from the perspective of fairness, prompting a higher level of thinking (for example, from the appropriate principle of action);
- participation in the development of group rules which respect the needs of all, not the power of some.

In all this, teaching can be vital: namely:

- insights into possible areas of conflict within the group;
- pedagogical skills in organising and refereeing interactions between differences;

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[7] Selman, R., 1976, 'Social cognitive understanding: a guide to educational and clinical practice', in Lickona, T., *Moral Development and Behaviour,* NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston

[8] Loevinger, J., 1976, *Ego Development,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

[9] Wasserman, E.R., 1976, 'Implementing Kohlberg's "Just Community School" in an Alternative High School', *Educational Analysis,* 5(1)

- incorporation of more principled modes of thinking into conversations and explanations;
- providing a more extended vocabulary through which emotions and reasons might be expressed;
- enabling the individual pupils to respect differences in points of view;
- helping them to articulate these different points of view.

Learning to respect others

Built into such an account is the underlying ‘respect for persons’, but there are different levels at which one might talk of such respect.

First, there is the recognition that the other has a mind of his or her own – has thoughts, feelings and motivations different from one’s own. We have seen above how even that minimum notion of respect can be more or less developed, and remain extremely limited even in the case of adults, for example, in the case of some parents of the children being taught. Furthermore, such a minimal notion of respect may be extended to only limited groups of people. There are obvious examples where such recognition has been denied to particular racial groups, to children or to people with mental disabilities.

Second, respect refers to having an attitude to others in which how they think and feel (even where they differ from one’s own) is taken seriously. To ignore such wants, thoughts and feelings is to ignore what is essentially individual about them as persons. What they think and feel needs to play a part in one’s own thinking, interactions and aspirations. Hence, there is a central need in teaching not only for the teacher *vis-à-vis* the learner but also for the learners *vis-a vis* each other to develop what Noddings refers to as the sense of ‘caring’.

> A ‘caring relation’ is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for’[10].

Central to that encounter is a ‘paying attention’ to the other’s needs, wants or problems - taking them seriously. Such attention and caring do not depend on liking. One can respect even those whom one dislikes, although this requires no doubt an effort, a moral disposition or virtues to be developed over time.

The development of respect in this sense requires two things: a coming to appreciate the circumstances which affect why others think and feel as they do, and attention to the social skills which enable one to relate to people who, possibly because of different backgrounds, do not react or relate in similar ways.

Therefore, if education in its evaluative sense (the idea of an educated person) concerns the development of persons as such, namely, helping others to develop their distinctively personal qualities (‘to learn to be human’), then it must not be narrowed to academic achievement, passing tests or getting a better paid job. Rather must it centrally be concerned with the development of the attitudes, dispositions and knowledge which enable one to respect oneself and others as persons – with their own ways of thinking and feeling, with their own potential for living valued lives, with their own need for recognition. To help young people to achieve this should be a central concern of the school and the teacher, demanding, first, specific pedagogical skills on the part of the teacher and, second, the community context which embodies this respect.

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[10] Noddings, N., 1992, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, p. 15.

What follows is a well researched and flourishing example of this in practice

II

Example: Family Links

Family Links (FL) is a charity, working in over a hundred schools not only with pupils and their teachers, but also with their parents – hence, family *links.* Its goal is to promote personal development very much along the lines described above as a central educational aim, and fundamental to general achievement in school and beyond.

At the core of that personal development, as argued above, lie qualities of personal relations, self-esteem and emotional well-being. Such qualities can remain undeveloped, indeed stunted by the social conditions and relations in which young people live at home and in their wider social networks. That is why FL insists upon working with the wider school community as well as with parents. As Kohlberg argued, it is difficult to foster moral attitudes and principled thinking unless these are embodied in the very institutions in which they are being fostered.

Let us then consider the interrelated elements in such development.

Behaviour towards oneself and others is to a large extent 'driven by feeling' – of anger, say, or of indifference. Embodied in such feelings are implicit judgements of the other person and of that person's attitude towards oneself or others. One is angry with someone, for example, because one believes (a) they have done something, (b) that something is harmful, (c) they either did know or should have known the harm which their action caused.

However, each of these implicit beliefs might be questioned. There is a need to develop the readiness and capacity to reflect upon these implicit judgments, to understand the cause of anger and to see the situation from the other's point of view. But such tendencies and capacities need to be developed. One's own anger gets in the way. One's incapacity to recognise how others see and value situations needs to be overcome – a shift from the egocentrism described above to one in which one recognises the other as a person, having different perspectives and understandings.

FL, therefore, aims to 'nurture' the appropriate skills, attitudes and capacities. 'Nurture' is an important word since it contrasts with 'instructing' or mere 'training'. It presupposes the capacities are embryonically present. 'Development', as argued above, is more a *transformation* of a previous state of thinking or functioning than something to be transmitted.

That nurturing programme has the following features.

First, there is a need for a common language through which feelings can be spoken about, 'managed', and understood – what is referred to as 'emotional literacy'. Issues of justice and fairness are at the heart of so many disputes and soured relationships. As one evaluation study reported,

> the language had helped the whole school community to have a common way of discussing feelings and behaviour and children to reflect on their behaviour.[11]

Or again, according to the deputy head of a secondary school,

> We have learnt the vocabulary and model to hang our own approach and values on. It has given the community a common language to enter into dialogue with students, each other and parents. Changing culture starts with changing the language we use.

Second, the capacity to see things from the point of view of others and to respect that perspective even when disagreeing with it (that is, respecting others as persons with minds of their own) is crucial, requiring considerable pedagogic skills on the part of the teacher. FL has developed classroom strategies through which that interpersonal knowledge and respect are developed – the group settings in which feelings and matters of interpersonal concern are discussed, albeit within a context of anonymity. For example, matters of interpersonal concern, though without clues to identity, are submitted for discussion. There are 'rules of engagement' such as only one person speaking at the same time and no interruptions. As Ofsted reported

> through the well structured nurturing programme the children have developed a mature awareness of the feelings, values and beliefs of others.

The work with prisoners has been instructive. Those committed to prison are often victims of their own undeveloped capacity to relate to and to respect others of different persuasions. Furthermore, as parents, they may fail to respect differences in the family or to respond appropriately to difficulties encountered by their children. As one stated,

> The Family Links deal with my anger – when I get out, instead of throwing my weight around I'm going to listen to their point of view.

Third, the ability to articulate one's point of view, to talk about feelings and to disagree with the contribution of others requires the development of self-confidence and self-esteem (in a place where one feels 'emotionally secure'), something akin to the 'ego-development' referred to by Loevinger. Crucial to the FL philosophy and programmes is the positive atmosphere, particularly the use of praise not only by the teachers but also by the pupils with each other.

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[11] Eaude Report

Fourth, though the programmes are developed for the classroom with curriculum time allocated, they require a school ethos which embodies the principle of fairness, positive respect for each person, finding opportunities for increasing self-respect, building good relationships, and openness to discussion of controversial matter which divide people.

Finally, such wider understanding, respect and empathy need to extend beyond the school community. That is why, uniquely, the school programmes are *linked* to parenting programmes[12]. There is little point is nurturing such capacities and interpersonal understanding and respect at school, if they are to be negated by the lack of understanding and respect at home - sometimes breaking the cycle of ineffective, neglectful or abusive parenting

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[12] Family Links, 2010, *The Parenting Puzzle*