



Can Bad People Run Good Schools?

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Yes, they can, if we limit the definition of a 'good' school. But why would we want that? And who would let them? In this paper I explore the relationship between the role of the headteacher and the formation of young people, and the impact of regulation without a shared understanding of ethical standards, in the English state school system.

In March 2017 the Association of School and College Leadersⁱ set up a Commission for Ethical Leadership 'to consider all matters of ethical leadership and public life as these relate to education leadership in the context of a highly diversified and increasingly autonomous landscape.'

By the end of 2017 the Commission will have had 5 initial meetings. It has the senior postholders or elected representatives from ASCL, the National Association of Head Teachers, OFSTED, the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, the Institute of Education, the National Society of the Church of England, the Freedom and Autonomy for Schools National Association, the Chartered College of Teaching, the Foundation for Leadership in Education, the International Confederation of College Principals, the National Governance Association, Ambition School Leadership and the Committee for Standards in Public Life. We hope to have a proposal to put before government and the profession by December 2018.

In our work we are feeling our way through the dilemma posed in the open call for papers for this conference, that is, the relationship between public and private virtues, and the legitimacy of the language of virtue in the description of collectives and institutions and the public good.

Schools are where society looks after its young until they are old enough to assume the mantle of adult citizenship. Emerging adults in the UK will have had up to 14 years of schooling, perhaps just in two institutions. In that time, they will have learned something of the knowledge that is valued by society and the personal attitudes or characteristics that are valued by society as a product of schooling. We would therefore hope that the good school will have a good effect, that the good school's teaching of good values is coterminous with those valued by society. So, what are they?

The work of character education is now well documented and those attending a conference such as this need no introduction to or exploration of its conventions and parameters. Poke any headteacherⁱⁱ with a stick and she'll tell you the characteristics valued by her school. Here are mineⁱⁱⁱ.



So far so good. Educated professionals, skilled in curriculum design and implementation, rising through the ranks of highly effective teachers to lead a nationally-coordinated school system can be trusted to devise or decide upon the appropriate virtues in which children might be schooled. The state's monitors and regulators will then be able to test and judge that the state's purposes and needs are being met: good schools producing educated good citizens.

Anyone familiar with the English education system of the last 20 years might be forgiven for raising an eyebrow at this bold assertion. One might even venture a polite cough: it doesn't always work that way. Verifying the product of knowledge through public examination should be straightforward but appears to be extraordinarily difficult. Verifying the quality of education, judged by the knowledge outputs combined with ad hoc character development is even more difficult. The national framework of '*Fundamental British Values*'^{iv} is contested and woolly. Anyhow, it doesn't answer the question. An outstanding headteacher leading an outstanding school with outstanding results is not required to be

personally virtuous. She might fulfil a good role in society, 'transforming children's lives' as the ubiquitous phrase has it, but does she have to be a good person to do it?

Let's turn this thing upside down and give it a good shake. Perhaps what falls out will help. It seems too obvious to say that good people can run bad schools. A bad school could perhaps be defined as the opposite to the one above. It might be characterised by a weak knowledge base, poor examination results, dangerous or harmful behaviour and ineffective leadership. Those conditions might be caused by teacher shortage, social context or not enough money. The headteacher might be kind, just, diligent, clever, temperate, magnanimous, honest and entirely trustworthy, but he might not be focused, or tough enough for the job, he might disregard the state's metrics or view them with suspicion. The output of this virtuous person's work might damage children, through their experience at, or their life chances after attending this school. (Much school policy-making since 2010 has echoes of this argument.) This head might be personally virtuous, but his work for the state is having a bad effect on the next generation of citizens. Is he, then, a good person?

Perhaps we could say that the citizen who accepts the payment of the state for the state's work has a responsibility to do the best possible job in the way that that state has decided it should be done. Crudely, for a headteacher of my generation, if you don't want to be measured by the outputs you're in the wrong job. It is no role for a maverick or a rebel: as well as numerical or statistical examination outcomes success is measured by how speedily one can demonstrate the applauded virtues of the day: entrepreneurialism, autonomy, expansionism-or-partnership, zero-tolerance, relentlessness, 'sky-high aspirations': all marketplace values, not personal virtues. Can a person opposed to or sceptical of these metrics be considered a good Headteacher? Is it actually possible for a good person to run a bad school, or is the methodology by which a school is considered 'good' so clearly agreed, expressed and directed that a person wishing to run a school another way must be deluded, stupid, disingenuous, bad?

Given that we have the calibration to measure the 'good'-ness of a school, and we have a developing consensus on the virtues informing most character education promoted by such schools, can we extrapolate from there to say that the good Headteacher of the good school must necessarily be possessed of the character virtues articulated in that school? A headteacher's leadership is symbolic and iconic as well as actual, so if she says that the virtues of the school are fairness, honesty, kindness, optimism and respect must she embody and demonstrate those personal virtues in herself and her actions? Well, perhaps. Even largely. But not necessarily.

School leaders perform two simultaneous functions when it comes to passing on what society values. They are both conduit and model: they must teach children how to be scholarly while being a model of scholarship themselves and they must teach children how to be good while setting an example of goodness themselves. If they do not value learning then it is unlikely that they will be able to pass on a love of learning to children. If they behave badly, then children see that power can be accrued by bad behaviour and hypocrisy. *Do as I say, kids, but not as I do. Or: do as you're told, without question. Don't bandy words with me, child, show some respect.*

It is probably fair to say that most parents in English schools expect the dual functions of the school to be upheld equally well. They want the English and maths grades to open the doors of prosperity in later life but they also entrust schools to share in the formation of the beloved child's character. This expectation is reciprocated by the state in the shared understanding of *in loco parentis*^v. The school takes the place of the parent when the child is at school, providing all that a careful parent would wish. It is reasonable for schools to pride themselves on their community spirit and their assumed and articulated institutional values as they provide a home away from home for their children.

It looks like this in practice: before the average secondary scholar gets up close to Keats or Lovelace, she might have been conveyed on a school bus, hung about in a school yard or corridor for a bit, bonded with her Form Tutor and experienced an assembly. She may be dressed in a uniform and she might have had to line up or process through a building according to fixed norms. If she feels unsafe or unhappy, there'll be someone to turn to and if she's naughty someone will put her right. Byron and Euclid won't get a look in until the philosophers, sociologists, theologians and educationalists have patted her down, wound her up and pointed her in the right direction.

Accepted rules and norms in school are not universal but decreed by the head or enshrined in tradition. While they are usually similar: don't talk over the teacher, don't disrupt learning, do your homework, don't hit people, swear, push or run, respect the fabric of the building – there's no reason why they should be. Schools may also entertain all sorts of outré positions: always walk with your hands behind your back, don't dye your hair, call me Madam. That most schools run along broadly similar lines suggests that we might have a set of assumptions about what is good for the young. Keep safe, be polite, try your best.

Headteachers would say that their explicit values help young people become good citizens. These range from personal virtues such as truthfulness and good temper through broad characteristics such as

conscientiousness and trustworthiness to perhaps more contestable beliefs: conformity, diligence, obedience or fear of authority. Classroom rules, school behaviour policies, ancient mottoes and inspirational slogans proclaim assumed norms and goods: *Education through Excellence, Sapere Aude, Achievement through Care, Education to understand the world and change it for the better, Honore et labore, Not for Thyself Alone.*

If one of the functions of the state is to develop through its law and institutions the habits of the good citizen, then schools play an important role in that development. If schools are run by a professional cadre of educators with a certain amount of freedom, then we invest huge hope in those people to identify and institutionalise the habits valued by the state. It's not too much to assert that schools are the proving ground for the state, test-beds for civic friendship, model societies in which the future health of the nation is assured. Their graduates could almost be hallmarked, stamped like the British lion that guarantees the health of our eggs.

So what kind of hallmark might we expect to find on the headteachers? Despite recent governments' best efforts, our definition of what makes a good citizen is vague: upholding Fundamental British Values^{vi}, honesty and obeying the law. Perhaps a bit of Kant-lite: do as you would be done by, or religious themes in religious schools. Where would we start?

Character education is perhaps the nearest we have to a national consensus on virtue. As I write, my own school has espoused kindness, honesty, fairness, respect and optimism. Other schools have longer lists, including the grit 'n' resilience allegedly espoused by the cadet corps of the public schools and currently enjoined upon the poor. We devise them in consultation with children, parents, governors, teachers. We think of subtle or crass ways of encouraging or enforcing them. We conduct assemblies on the absolute worth of such personal virtues. We even inspect for them under unmeasurable headings: social, moral and spiritual development. In order to name them for our children, we can pluck the values of the good state seemingly from the air. When it comes to naming them for the adults who run the schools, we shy away. Why?

The big names in the history of schooling had no such qualms. To William of Wykeham^{vii} manners made men. Arnold^{viii} of Rugby believed that his job was to save boys' souls, instil morality and develop their intellects, in that order. Where he led, other schools followed, including the rose-tinted grammar schools of the mid-twentieth-century. Comprehensive education arose from a dream of greater equality after a crippling war.

The redevelopment of state education from Callaghan's Ruskin College speech^{ix} to the present has been prosaic by comparison: for the last 20 years, we've fought over the curriculum and school structures. The 1988 National Curriculum 'value' of supporting a just and sustainable democracy was swept aside as structure and deliverance took precedence, focusing almost entirely on the end-product of better-qualified sixteen-year-olds. Likewise Ofsted: if it fits the grade descriptors, it works. The outcomes are the total measure of the process. Are we unable to think about the ethical purpose of schooling?

Perhaps not. There have been three recent developments which, closely studied, might hint at our capacity for deeper consideration.

- The first is curriculum. When Michael Gove began his radical reforms in 2010 he did so against a background of widespread poor-quality curricula in comprehensive schools as heads pursued the GCSE grades which guaranteed their and their schools' survival. To that end, many heads had imposed qualificatory pathways which offered a weak and shallow curriculum to children, larded with examination tricks. When Gove launched the half-thought English Baccalaureate^x, the racketsy debate started to touch on what children should learn and how and the perverse incentives of the performance tables were finally given an airing. What should all children know, and why? What do we believe about ourselves that makes knowledge important?
- The second is the series of issues around the Trojan Horse^{xi} debate. While the Department's arms-length regulator, the National College for Teaching and Leadership^{xii}, has failed to bring a meaningful case to court, the ideological implications of opening a national education system to market forces have been illuminated. Where religion's role in education was moderated through the post-war settlement with the churches^{xiii} there is no such moderation required in the Free School and academy^{xiv} programme. The nation heretofore had not had to worry that immoderate doctrine might affect children's futures as free citizens. The current legal ruling on single-sex teaching in mixed schools^{xv} has, at least, provoked a minor debate about equality.
- Third, the zombie re-emergence of the debate on grammar schools^{xvi} encouraged some commentators to return to the comprehensive dream of an educated citizenry educated together, and the howling injustice of sealing a child's future through an unreliable test taken at 10 years old.

All three of these events allowed educators to express views around the notions that education should be fair, boys and girls should be equally educated widely and well and that the curriculum should give

them genuine knowledge so that their horizons may be broadened. Fairness, justice, right ambition, accountability, integrity, openness, even optimism. Some of these are virtues: is this a start?

School leaders are not entirely clueless on this matter. They largely run happy and safe communities and must get their inspiration from somewhere. Ask a group to identify ethical principles, even the Principles for Public Life^{xvii} and they struggle, but their guesswork is pretty reliable: honesty, trustworthiness, transparency. When pressed they tend to shy away from first order virtues and clutch onto products or outcomes such as leadership and integrity, or even adjectival abstractions like excellence. Part of the reason for this may be a very British embarrassment about claiming too much, appearing to take oneself too seriously or sounding religious.

Or it may be a much more worrying product of compliance and clumsy regulation. School leaders are so frightened of losing their jobs that they absolutely will not espouse any value or virtue for which there is no compliance mechanism, no tick-list they can wave to prove that a standard has been reached and the performance indicated. I may instil honesty and respect in my young people but the system encourages me to bend the truth in my publicity and threaten colleagues with dismissal when impossible targets aren't met. Fearful for our reputations and mortgages we focus on compliance. What else should we do? How would you measure trustworthiness? What's love got to do with it?

It is one thing to agree that children should be encouraged to develop personal virtues and behaviours adults know will make them better citizens. It is another thing to have a vague idea that a national education system should be aligned with whatever might be the values of a liberal democracy. It is a task of a different order to place in the Headteacher the responsibility for the simultaneous deliverance of both strands especially if, as I have argued, she is an exemplar as well as a conduit. The needs of the child and the good state coalesce in her leadership of the model community: the fundamentals of this duty are underthought in our system. The state in its turn needs to establish that the job is being done well and with integrity. This is as difficult to achieve as it is to express. The easier route is to expect headteachers to embrace the authorised or assumed behaviours of the marketplace to keep their autonomous schools afloat. Are these bad people running good schools, or good people turned bad by the structural requirements of 'good'-ness?

Are bad people running good schools? Yes, because if they exceed performance indicators the system calls them good and then unavoidably sets them up as an example for children. In this way the assumed values of the marketplace - greed and naked ambition, for example - become the prime values set before

the young. Don't blame Donald Trump: we've been accidentally assembling a loose-leaf manual for flawed school leadership for years, and we use it in classrooms every day.

It is to prevent such compromise and tragedy that we need to develop a language of ethics in school leadership. While the Principles for Public Life are both noteworthy and praiseworthy, they need explanation for headteachers. Can we extract principles from the collective consciousness that comes up with stout lists of personal virtues for the young but prefers to talk of 'leadership styles' for adult role-models? If not, where should we look? Aristotelian virtues with residual Christianity? The Big Five personality traits of psychometric testing? Can we find a way to talk of love, kindness, friendliness, wit, good temper and right ambition, of the personal virtues that make headteachers reliable *in loco parentis* for our children? This is the work of the Ethical Leadership Commission and we will report soon.

It is achievable because we are not entirely morally adrift. Adults largely know what makes for a good society and what we want for our own families. At home most of us try to model love, wit, good temper, magnanimity, reciprocity, duty, kindness, service, hope and all the virtues of a good life. Human frailty brings us down but neighbours help and support each other to survive and flourish. We know that wealth and status don't amount to strength of character and that kindness is more important than dominance. Right ambition is – well – right, and more praiseworthy than the other kind.

We worry, however, that we can't live up to these standards professionally and so we find ourselves in a terrific pickle. We know our system has to be regulated and monitored, but we have grown so fearful of the destructive potential of regulation on our schools and careers that we have embraced compliance like drowning people. We don't want to be professionally held to the wider values of a good society because our structures sometimes prevent us from reaching them. If I'm honest about my results the school might close. If I put a child's mental health before his exam results I'm an enemy of promise^{xviii}.

It is in this desperate undermining of professionalism that our problem nests. We have no faith in our own judgements because we have no accepted shared secular language in which to express them. Therefore, school leaders prefer to say nothing on the matter of ethical leadership because we are programmed to do as we are told. If the regulator wants 90% of children to do a certain set of subjects by 2024 then I will plan to achieve that whether I think it right or wrong educationally. I can strain every sinew to reach a progress score of 0 and when I have done both, then I will have a good school. Whatever the regulators want, that is the total good for the system.

How we reached a point of such prescribed ambition is a tragic story of good intentions. How it has played out into a chronic teacher shortage isn't hard to see: fear, suspicion and joylessness are unattractive in any career.

To get back on our feet we need to use our wisdom and intellect to expose this intellectually cheap and lazy pathway for what it is. It is possible to make judgements about what is good and bad for our children even if it's also hard to do. It is possible to decide, collectively on right and wrong and be certain that some activities are good, some acceptable, and others insupportable. The work of the Ethical Leadership Commission is experimenting with the language of virtue as a way of informing the relationship between the headteacher, the state and the child.

I've been having conversations with groups of current and aspiring headteachers. What are the virtues that we assume? After familiarising practitioners with the language of virtue I invite them to apply them. For example:

You might be able to run a school well if you have occasionally made an error of judgment such as a poor-quality appointment or you're working hard to shift a structural deficit, or if a staff member makes an honest error in examination entries. If you don't cross a line into incompetence and lies, if you know what the problem is and the school runs reasonably successfully then you should still be able to practice. But what about these?

- *Should you run a school if you are unfaithful to your partner and lie about it?*
- *Should you run a school if you have been banned from driving because of drinking?*
- *Should you run a school if you have a conviction for domestic violence?*
- *Should you run a school if you deliberately submit fraudulent tax returns?*

We might produce answers such as:

- *Yes. Society accepts some dissonance in matters of love.*
- *Yes, if it was a single error of judgement but not if you're an unreformed alcoholic because that will consistently impair your judgement and make you an unsafe state parent: you lack temperance.*

- *No, because it's a crime, and it demonstrates cruelty, which always damages others especially children. You lack self-control, which is important to develop in young people.*
- *No, because it's a crime and you need to be trusted with public money. You are dishonest and untrustworthy. You lack truthfulness.*

All of the above are hard to deal with. They are embarrassing and provide dangerous role models for the nation's young. The second pair might require whistleblowing at the very least. But what about activities internal to the school?

- *Should you run a school if your behaviour towards staff makes them so fearful they can't function properly?*
- *Should you run a school if you encourage or turn a blind eye to malpractice?*
- *Should you run a school if you are prepared to off-roll difficult children to improve your outcome scores?*
- *Should you run a school if you set up legal companies so you and your family may be paid more from school budget than your salary indicates?*
- *Should you run a school if you want to be paid a salary way beyond the conventions of the system?*

Again, such actions might demonstrate the absence of good temper, humility, trust, kindness, truthfulness, prudence, honesty, selflessness, conscientiousness, service, accountability and openness. These are virtues that adults recognise and value in their personal lives. However, it seems likely that the above are current within our system and that many 'good' or 'outstanding' headteachers, as judged by the system's internal calibrations, might do them or be tempted to do them. My interlocutors are relieved to be able to discuss such things, reassured that it is OK to worry. We could do with a mechanism to tackle such things.

School leaders are familiar with compromise and ambiguity. We have a working functional understanding of what constitutes a good school, but we accept that the assumptions underlying the ascription of 'good'-ness may not deliver objectively good education. We understand that people with the right intentions may feel trapped into bad behaviour to secure their schools or their jobs. We know

enough about virtue education for children to be able to work towards creating an artifice for adult virtue in schools.

So it's not that we don't know what's right or wrong, it's that we fear that the system doesn't know or care whether we're good or bad as long as schools meet targets. We have become paralysed by fear of failure, insecurity and humiliation. We turn our back on the dreadful example such timidity and box-ticking sets the young and hope that someone, somewhere is telling them a better way to live.

Schools are where society looks after its young until they are old enough to assume the mantle of adult citizenship. All school performance indicators are therefore proxies for the good society, sufficient but not necessary. A good school needs more than grade descriptors and compliance frameworks. It needs to be rooted in the virtues we value most and which we would want everyone everywhere to espouse as a way of life. When we've courageously and publicly decided what they are we must demonstrate them in ourselves before we teach them to our young. When we're more confident with the language of values then the answer to my question is clear.

Yes, a bad person might be able to run a tick-list school, but why would we want that? And who would let them?

Carolyn Roberts 21.11.17

ⁱ ASCL is a professional association for senior management postholders in schools, with a membership of about 19 000 www.ascl.org.uk

ⁱⁱ School leaders have increasingly Ruritanian titles, from Headteacher to CEO: I use 'headteacher' to cover them all.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Tallis School, Royal Borough of Greenwich www.thomastallischool.com

^{iv} <https://www.gov.uk/.../guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published> 27 Nov 2014 - 'All have a duty to 'actively promote' the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.'

^v *In loco parentis* is the legal convention that teachers assume the mantle of parents when the child is with in school. This is not a duty delegated by the parent, but inherent in the teacher's role.

^{vi} Teacher Standards 2012 part 2, UK Department for Education 27.11.14
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/teachers-standards>

^{vii} William of Wykeham was Bishop of Winchester and Chancellor of England. He founded New College Oxford and New College School in 1379, and Winchester College in 1382.

^{viii} Thomas Arnold 1795 – 1842 was headmaster of Rugby School and had much influence on the development of public school education in England.

^{ix} Prime Minister James Callaghan, Ruskin College 1976, opened debate about schools and their curricula. This is thought to be the beginning of a process which led to the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the National Curriculum.

^x <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english...ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebac>. A group of qualifications which, taken together, perform solely as an accountability measure in performance tables.

^{xi} A series of events in Birmingham academy trusts which was originally reported as a plan to make state schools more Islamic in nature. The report into this controversy is by Ian Kershaw.

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1579/investigation_report_trojan_horse_letter_the_kershaw_report

^{xii} To close in 2018

^{xiii} Legislation which brought voluntary and church schools into a new system which would guarantee secondary education for all. www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/7-8/31/contents/enacted

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/educationact1944/>

^{xiv} Free schools and academies are part of UK government policy, 'to increase diversity and choice in the provision of state-funded education'. They are free of local government control and report directly to the Department for Education through Regional Schools Commissioners. <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/academies>

^{xv} <https://www.tes.com/.../ofsted-boss-defends-single-sex-schools-following-court-ruling> gives the background to this particular controversy

^{xvi} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/educational-excellence-everywhere> is the White Paper where Theresa May's new government sought to allow schools and local government to reintroduce selection of children for secondary education by ability at age 10-11 and the expansion of grammar schools. It was abandoned after the narrow General Election victory of 2017.

^{xvii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life> Also known as the Nolan Principles, these and the supporting structure were set up by John Major's government in 1995 and their reach expanded to all public office holders under the Blair government.

^{xviii} Michael Gove 23 March 2013, Daily Mail '*I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates 'the new enemies of promise' for opposing his plans*'.