

MEANINGFUL EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF VALUES AND BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that children are entitled to an education that assists them in life and its meaning. However in the light of recent curriculum reviews on both sides of the Scots border, calling for more educationally relevant curricula, it seems worth reconsidering the longstanding question of how school information could be better ordered for pupils' rational educational experience. Children's right to meaningful education is understood as a right to be raised in an essay. The theory of experiential learning by Kolb (1984) and the theory of Kuh (2008) on the development of high-impact higher education activities are used to suggest a structure to enhance the educational standard of co-curricular post-secondary programming. There are suggestions for ways in which the co-curricular record should step beyond its use as a recording tool to become an integral part of the learning process instead. There are duties for both parents and teachers that resemble the two aspects of meaningful education. I contend that in the beginning of the good they themselves hold, parents have the freedom to enhance their children, but that this freedom is controlled in two ways. Firstly, they have to give the freedom to their children to look for alternate conceptions. Secondly, the beginning of the good that their children are given must be moral.

KEYWORDS: Defining a 'meaningful' education, Duty to Provide Meaningful Education, Meaningful Education and the 'improvement'.

INTRODUCTION

The gratitude of this right provides the most important privilege to children to obtain an education, since rights are the best way of protecting people's interests. Rights signal 'that certain desirable goods, qualities, or actions that are calculated central to human and social well-being should be given special status and freedom' (Freedman 1990, p. 490).

First of all, Baumeister argues that people need intent, because goals or aims give meaning to plans and actions by allowing individuals to analyze potential actions and determine which actions to take, and therefore give meaning to their lives as well. In addressing the question of how individuals find meaning in life, I will return to this need.

Secondly, people need meaning, that is, a 'motivation to feel right and good and justifiable in their actions' (Baumeister, 1991, p. 36). This means that individuals have a set of principles that form the foundation of their actions and against which their actions are measured. In responding to the second question, I will return to this need as well.

Thirdly, individuals need effectiveness, i.e. to feel they have some influence over events. Based on a wide variety of examples, Baumeister establishes that they lose meaning and may have feelings of depression as people lose power or influence. The fourth and final need addressed by Baumeister is the need for self-worth, which he defines as the need for some self-esteem and respect for others to be asserted (Baumeister, 1991, p. 44). In my opinion, this need is the least linked to meaning in life. I agree with Baumeister that there is a necessity for people to have a sense of worth, but instead of arguing that self-worth is important for life to have meaning, I would argue the contrary, namely that having a meaning is a necessary condition for feelings of self-worth.

I therefore conclude, partly after Baumeister, that people have a sense of meaning in life when their lives have a purpose in two senses, namely when they have life goals and when they believe that their lives make a difference, and when they have a system of values that make the purpose understandable.

Frankl notes that, through self-transcendence, people can find meaning (Frankl, 1981, p. 16). For example a person may find meaning by creating work or communicating with others. Although I do not fully support his argument that the more people immerse themselves in a role or the more committed they are to another person, the more human they are (Frankl, 1981, p. 16), psychological studies on the origins of the meaning of people in life demonstrates that people find meaning in a number of areas of life. Relationships, service, work, leisure or pleasant hobbies, and wellbeing are among these (see Baumeister, 1991; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). In other terms, in bits of meanings from various fields of one's life, meaning in life is found. In their interactions with friends, families, partners, and kids, and their work and hobbies, people find sense. So far the answer to the question of how people find meaning seems to imply that meaning

is something that emerges from the actions and commitments of one and that it is sought by individuals in the action or commitment itself. This however is only part of the solution and is inadequate on its own. People need aims to make sense of their actions, as already suggested, and they need principles to judge their actions. Thus, meaning is a creation or representation of one's experience based on a heuristic system formed from the goals and values of one. To make one's perceptions and one's life intelligible and valuable (see Frankfurt, 1999, p. 85), a system of (final) ends and values is essential. Because of Rawls' definition of a concept of the good as a more or less determinate scheme of ends, that is, ends we want to realize for this system, I will use the notion of a conception of the good.

Having found a sense does not indicate that it can never be lost or challenged. Henri Nouwen, for instance, was a highly regarded Harvard University professor of theology, but wanted to leave the university to work for people with learning disabilities in a group. He felt it would be more important to function within this culture than becoming a Harvard University professor. This case, which is connected to the working life of a person, can be generalized. For example, when a woman discovers a significant aspiration in her life that she cannot conceive while being a mother, she needs to find alternate ways of seeking meaning either by concentrating on other areas of life or by finding alternatives that will fulfill her ideal (see Baumeister, 1991).

Having explained what meaning means in life, we must now question whether it is a fundamental interest to have a meaning in life. In life, one can live without meaning, so it is not biologically important to have meaning. In everybody's life, however the issue of meaning in life is prevalent. "In their lives, everyone wants a sense of intent (Baumeister, 1991), or Frankl's words "people have the will to mean," I.e. "the striving in personal life to find a meaningful meaning" (Frankl, 1985, p. 123). Without meaning, people will lose their desire or reason to live, and we can therefore say, as Frankl (1985) does, that it is existentially necessary to have a meaning in life. It is therefore a fundamental interest to have meaning in life. It cannot, however be viewed as a positive right, i.e. a right to obtain something since value in life is impossible to be granted. It is important to view meaningful education constructed as providing a concept of the good in a twofold way, linked to the significance of obtaining a concept of the good and being able to focus on one's conception of the good. Firstly, in a cohesive primary community, children ought to be brought up (see Taylor, 1992; McLaughlin, 1994; De Ruyter & Miedema, 2000). This is mainly the responsibility of parents. The ultimate ends of one's conception of the good are thus not only inherently, but also instrumentally valuable in the light of practical education, because they

provide the reasons for one's acts and thus the purpose of one's actions and one's life (see Frankfurt, 1999).

Defining a 'meaningful' education.

Parents, policymakers and bureaucrats alike are concerned about the achievement of a 'healthy' education for young people, but their perceptions of this can be very different. It is often estimated that young people embrace what they are educationally given; however, research indicates that as young people reach secondary schooling years, they are more likely to communicate their views and needs on what to learn and how to learn it (Smyth, McInerney, and Hattam 2003). For some young people who do not feel at home' at school for numerous reasons, this is also a time when higher levels of conflict with teachers are involved; their feelings are exacerbated if they have gathered years of educational failure' and lack of belonging. The educational journeys of these students are frequently defined by cycles of interruption and absence that conclude in exclusion or drop out (Smyth and Hattam 2004).

Duty to Provide Meaningful Education

If my argument that children are entitled to meaningful education is acknowledged, then parents and teachers need to provide meaningful education for children. I would define the duty of parents as a duty to raise their child within a conception of the good and the duty of teachers as one to educate children about a variety of conceptions of the good, drawing on the two facets of meaningful education. To prove that such an argument would be incorrect, it does not seem appropriate to perform an empirical analysis, since we all know people with non-religious perceptions of the good who find value in life. Research that has been carried out demonstrates that individuals, regardless of whether or not they are religious, are able to find meaning in their lives (Frankl, 2000, p. 141). Based on the assumption that religious definitions of the good are as true as other interpretations of the good, they should assert this right. They may also argue that they have a right to freedom to hold a specific conception of the good and therefore, if they are forced to raise their children within a conception of the good, their right to freedom should be applied to the fulfillment of that obligation (see McLaughlin, 1984, 1985, 1990; Callan, 1985; G. The obligation of teachers to provide meaningful education is translated as a duty to provide a variety of conceptions of the good that can function in improving their sense of meaning in life as frames or horizons for children I share Noddings '(1993) ideas about introducing a variety of prevalent conceptions of meaning in life to pupils in secondary schools, although it is highly

demanding for teachers to maintain pedagogical neutrality and address both religious and non-religious positions objectively and respectfully. In her opinion, education places great importance on knowledge for what she terms intelligent belief or unbelief, but what is important is that 'knowledge must come to grips with the emotional and spiritual as well as the analytical and psychological' (Noddings, 1993, p. xiv). I want to argue that teachers in primary schools must also introduce students to a variety of conceptions of the good. Given the age of the students, the aim would not be to invite the children to focus on the conception of the good in which they are raised, but to increase their awareness and understanding of the conceptions of the good of other people and thus their reverence for others. In primary schools, meaningful education also has another component. I noted in the previous section that children need to be brought up in a cohesive, primary community. It can be argued that this often involves coherence between the family's primary culture and the school, suggesting that they have an interest in attending a religiously oriented school if children are raised in religious communities (McLaughlin, 1994; De Ruyter & Miedema, 2000).

Meaningful Education and the 'improvement'

I have upheld the argument that children have a right to meaningful education and that this means that they have the right to be brought up within a cohesive definition of the good and to learn about a number of alternative conceptions. I support Rawls' idea of a good conception that is good in both a non-moral and a moral sense, although, as we will see at the end of this section, the moral sense can be interpreted in different ways. However, the value one finds in life, in a non-moral and moral context, is not inherently good (see Frankfurt, 1999, p. 85). May we, however, argue that in both senses, substantive education should be good? My attempt to affirmatively address this question starts with a further analysis of the relationship between sense and good. However, outsiders prefer to call such a life pointless or at least not significant when a person lives an unproductive or unethical life, which implies that people assume there is a connection between meaning and good. This is wrong, Singer argues. When we judge the life of another as being unworthy or immoral, we do not conclude that if it is important to that person, it does not have value, but rather that it is not a desirable or a good life. There is no difference, according to Singer, between a life that is meaningful to a person and a life that is meaningful in itself (Singer, 1992, p. 110). He recommends using the word 'significance' rather than 'meaningful' to refer to our assessment that for example, some lives are more meaningful than others because they are committed to helping others or enhancing science standards instead of concentrating only on the

individual's interests. The life of a person can be important, but meaningless. To be essential implies that one's life is committed to the ends that we want because they transcend the objective of personal well-being. As we create, and function for, values that may arise in self-interest but ultimately help others; we attain and feel our importance in the world (Singer, 1992, p. 115).

However this means to me that while a meaningful life is not a required requirement for a meaningful life; a meaningful life can contribute to one's purpose in life. Throughout the varied pursuits that make life meaningful, what remains constant is the growth of meaning as it includes the development of values in the service of transpersonal ideals (Singer, 1992, p. 117). The singer seems to argue for a similar role.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, we propose that a single-minded emphasis on qualifications for current participation carries significant long-term risks for all young people's socio-economic well-being, but in particular for those who are already degraded and impoverished. Instead of recognizing the differences in their educational history, such an approach strengthens these young people's deficit perception of becoming inexperienced in demanding intellectual work. Therefore while meaningful lives are not inherently important lives, meaningful education means, in my opinion, that children are given a philosophy of the good that encourages them to live important lives because it increases their ability to find meaning in life. It is important and meaningful to educate for individual and national economic maintenance, but we propose that it should be influenced by the perspective of the future and be part of a wider educational system. In public schools, this is usually the case, but once young people are outside the system, they face the difficulty of seeking services and alternative sites that offer more than a short-term solution for participation.

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