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Dialogue in Schools as Households

Julian Stern

York St John University, York, United Kingdom

Background

This paper forms part of the *Spirit of the School* project (published as Stern 2009). One of the research instruments used in that project is a 'circles of importance' activity, asking for responses on 'me and the people closest to me in school'. The results of that element of the research indicated that staff and pupils felt closer to each other than is usually portrayed in the literature. In order to theorise this closeness, the model of the family home was considered, but was inappropriate for a number of reasons. However, the older social model of a 'household' seemed to cover many aspects of schooling - with schools as neither entirely private homes nor entirely public institutions. Such schools as households are particularly suited to dialogue, with dialogue conceived as of existential significance.

Research Questions

What emerged from the project was a theorisation of the 'spirit' of the school, as an inclusive community with magnanimous leadership that enables friendship through dialogue in order to create and evaluate valuable or beautiful meanings, valuable or beautiful things, and good people (Stern 2009, p 161). That model developed out of the work of philosophers such as Buber on dialogue and Macmurray on community. Work on both community and dialogue touches on the somewhat taboo topic of friendship. 'Friendship' has been romanticised and sexualised, and can be difficult to 'admit', so people are pushed to describe friendship only in private contexts - in homes and families - rather than in public contexts such as schools.

There are attempts to make schools sexless and therefore, in post-Freudian times, somewhat friendless places. Schools are made purely public and functional institutions, as is reflected in the well-meaning yet disturbing comment in a recent government plan entitled *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures* (DCSF 2007), that 'government does not bring up children - parents do - so government needs to do more to back parents and families' (DCSF 2007, p 5). The implication that schools do not 'bring up' children should surprise those used to contributing, through professional school work, to the upbringing of children. Of course there are differences between families and schools (well described in Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003), yet the contrast between the institutions much not be exaggerated. A simple contrast between a private 'home' and a public institution such as a 'school' is belied by many well-established social institutions in contemporary life. Residential schools more obviously combine private and the public functions, as do prisons, military barracks, kibbutzim, and monasteries and other religious communities. Yet mainstream, non-residential, schools are themselves neither strictly public nor private.

Methods

It is friendship, suitably theorised (as in Aristotle's writings, for example), that can be the key to understanding schools as something other than strictly private or strictly public but as distinct forms of community.

Frame

Macmurray distinguishes communities from social groups by how people behave in them. Communities are positive and personal; societies are negative and impersonal. Both community and society are vital, but they are differentiated by the intentions of their members. In communities, people treat each other as ends in themselves; in societies, people treat each other - and the society -

as means to further ends. Schools, for Macmurray, are necessarily communities (as described in detail in Stern 2001). They are necessarily places where people treat each other as ends in themselves, as 'when we try to teach, we must deal with living human beings. ... We may act as though we were teaching arithmetic or history. In fact we are teaching *people*. The arithmetic or the history is merely a medium through which a personal intercourse is established and maintained' (Macmurray 1968, p 5).

Macmurray describes schools, families and friendship groups as communities. If schools were to be seen as essentially private, in the way that families and homes are seen as private, then Macmurray's description would not be appropriate. However, the simple division between public and private is itself open to question. That division is probably a modern invention, according to the historical accounts of Webb (2007) and Vernon (2005), developing later in early modern times along with the broad social change that separated the 'private' from the 'civic' or 'public'.

Research findings

The social institutions continuing such forms included religious communities (monasteries and convents), the armed services, prisons, and boarding (residential) schools. Later institutions added to the list might include communes and kibbutzim, both political developments from the twentieth century. Setting aside the armed forces and prisons, both of which have clear externally-directed functions, what all the other institutions have in common with families is their exemplification of Macmurray's meaning of a 'community'. Schools can be looked at as households, not as modern 'public' places, because they have such an admixture of intimacy (supervised eating and toileting, for example), and as not modern 'private' places either, because they have such an admixture of professional standards, accountability, and lack of some forms of secrecy common in homes. People in schools - staff and pupils - are and should be treated as ends in themselves, as close and friendly, and the schools are also open to the society and communities beyond the schools. Their position as like households, personal yet not entirely private, represents an overcoming of the private-public division that Buber, in particular, thought damaged much modern life. Theorising schools as communities like households, this paper indicates some of the implications for policy and practice.

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