

Sunday 31 October 2021

Dear everyone

Word of the moment: 'Metaverse'.

Headline: *Squid Games*. The general feedback from online safety advice is that parents are not alert enough to what is happening online, now that there are *Squid Games* spin off online games. Parental controls are not just about foul language and guns but protecting children against ideas and concepts that they are not ready for. In the case of *Squid Games* these include gambling addiction, debt, exploitation, despair, torture, sadism and suicide.

This link is designed for parents.

https://nationalonlinesafety.com/wakeupwednesday/squid-game-trending-across-platforms-what-parents-need-to-know?fbclid=IwAR0gR4_0HjAYvPINA6UK0aszIKcI0-8yC4K5CrOI2Es-dGzj9MjxeYQkBtQ

For all that, welcome back to the second half. Like an old movie, there was a short break while we changed the reel, swept up the discarded drinks cartons from under the flip-up seats, and stretched our legs, and we can now settle into the story of school towards Christmas.

What is the point of school? What are its aims? To whom is it in service?

Everyone has a view about these questions, and they are notoriously difficult to pin down.

Let's start with the last question. Who is it for? Children, clearly, but also their parents and arguably wider society. So far, so easy. But what about teachers, to what ends are schools for them? If it was just about the money, plenty of them wouldn't bother – indeed in certain areas of education teachers are leaving in their droves. Great teachers are driven by something much more intrinsic – we're in the business of changing the world to be a better place, but on terms defined by the young in the long run.

What are the legitimate aims of schools? We talk often about such things as inculcating ideas of fairness and kindness. They are at least one category of aim in the domain of moral thinking. Others are about 'stuff to know how to do': read, write, draw, make music, kick balls into a goal, dance. It becomes contentious when you start to argue about priorities of 'stuff to know how to do'. Try that at home, involve your child and see how far you get. Not as easy as it looks.

Is it legitimate to aim to cultivate curiosity? We say we do, but can it really be done, how do we do it, and how will we know when it has been achieved? Are such things naturally occurring dispositions or traits that can be 'trained'? If so, how?

Blimey, school is looking a little bit more complicated now. What is it to produce 'good' citizens, and on whose terms, another aim commonly espoused by schools?

To what extent can or should schools protect children from the ills of the world? This letter starts with an alarm bell about a new breed of online game, as an example of a legitimate measure to reduce harm.

What does 'flourishing' look like? Any dictionary definition will show the challenges of whether flourishing should be a legitimate aim of education. I think we *should* aim at flourishing, but the terms ought to be quite tightly defined so that one person's luxuriant prospering doesn't diminish another person's opportunity to thrive. But then that comes from a personal bias towards a particular kind of theory of social justice, which is at odds with others.

My favourite aim is the supporting of autonomy. Even that is very heavily contested. You need a good deal of experience and 'stuff to know how to do' for autonomy to carry any real weight. Giving a five-year-old autonomy over the preparation and cooking of Sunday lunch for 12 people, with free access to the oven, boiling pans of water, sharp knives and a brined turkey the same weight as the child ...not such a good idea, and certainly social services would want to have a chat with you about that. But you can entrust them to shell the peas and lay the table etc.

Harvey Siegel, a leading philosopher of education, presents an interesting and, to my mind, a compelling account of that first question which seemed on the surface relatively easy to answer: to whom are schools in service?

Drawing on another philosopher, Israel Scheffler, Siegel invites us to think about the role of schools to be both *in service* to society and *as a direct challenge to it*. On the one hand, that education is about equipping people to exist and thrive in the world as it is currently known and understood, and at the same time to move young people to take aim at society and change it for the better. That schools and the education that happens within them is not entirely focused on known outcomes, but is at least equally set up to criticise and enlighten.

How might we do this? What might need to change if this idea of the role of a school is worthwhile? I have every confidence that young people today will come up with some difficult questions for us to answer, and we should be encouraging that, and we need to be ready to hear what they have to say.

I wanted to check with Harvey Siegel about whether my letter to you was framing him or the questions in an unhelpful way, and he wrote back: "*I see no errors in your message to parents, though you might want to emphasize the schools' task of defending the independent values of free inquiry and rational evaluation/criticism, and by extension its independence from and critical leverage over contemporary societal values (whatever they are)*".

On the question of rational evaluation and criticism, American philosopher and Professor of Government Theory at Harvard, Michael Sandel, was a recent guest on *Desert Island Discs*. He makes the point that it is the argument, the exploration of the difference of ideas that is where things start – and it is disquieting. And perhaps as we look ahead to COP26, we might be hopeful of really meaningful commitments to come, but it will not be without those difficult arguments. As the FT pointed out, COP26 must not be a vanity exercise.

He also chose some wonderful music, much of which is apposite for the big questions of our time.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0010wl5>

Very best wishes

Simon