An exploration of the notion of the ‘Good Enough School’

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Abstract

Education systems in many countries have very high expectations of schools. Stakeholders of all kinds - governors, headteachers and students and those beyond the school such as the state, parents and employers, expect the highest standards of student education and care and continually raise those expectations. Parental/student choice, school inspection, and education policies all drive high and rising expectations. For those who fail to comply, the stakes are similarly high and rising. It is as if only Perfect Schools that meet the students’ every need will suffice. Only then will all those with an interest in schools be satisfied.

In the paper, we argue that Perfect Schools are not possible nor are they desirable for important educational/developmental reasons. Drawing on the good enough mother concept, first articulated by Donald Winnicott 60 years ago (Winnicott 1953) we develop an alternative notion, the Good Enough School.

Winnicott argued that good mothering is not perfect mothering. Whilst good mothering is fundamentally positive and of good intent, it leaves a ‘space’ between the child’s expressed need and the mother meeting that need. The good-enough mother begins by adapting almost completely to her child’s needs. However, she gradually adapts less and less completely, according to the child's growing ability to cope with her ‘failure’ (Winnicott, 1953). In this way, the child is enabled to become autonomous and learns to cope with disappointments and frustrations, respect others’ limitations and needs and take responsibility for doing things for themselves. The good enough mother notion is often associated with the provision of a holding environment which provides a secure, contained environment for the developing child.

The Good Enough concept is very apt when applied to schools. It is not suggesting some idealized perfection but the creation of a ‘potential space’ (Winnicott, 1971) which enables the students to move in a positive direction - developing their independence and enabling them to respond appropriately to setbacks, value others for what they are, and take responsibility for themselves.

To start this roundtable, we will discuss the Good Enough School concept and related notions such the holding environment. We will also consider vignettes from schools in Israel and the UK to illustrate the concept. The discussion will: explore the idea; consider examples of the desire for a school to be ‘perfect’; and discuss the implications of the Good Enough School concept for policy-makers and school leaders.

Introduction

Education systems in many countries have very high expectations of schools. Stakeholders of all kinds - governors, headteachers, students and those beyond ‘the school’ such as the state, parents and employers, expect the highest standards of student education and care and
continually raise those expectations. Parental/student choice, school inspection, and education policies also drive high and rising expectations. For those who fail to comply, the stakes are similarly elevated and rising. It is as if only ‘Perfect Schools’ that meet the students’ every cognitive and affective need will suffice. Only then will all those with an interest in schools be completely satisfied.

In this article, we argue that Perfect Schools are not possible nor are they desirable for important educational/developmental reasons. Drawing on the ‘Good Enough Mother’ concept, first articulated by Donald Winnicott 60 years ago (Winnicott 1953), we develop an alternative notion, the Good Enough School This concept may better reflect the complex reality of the educational process in schools and sharpen our understanding of the limitations of attempting to create perfect educational outcomes.

Conceptual issues

Winnicott (1953) argued that good mothering is not perfect mothering. Whilst good mothering is fundamentally positive and of good intent, it leaves a ‘space’ between the child’s expressed need and the mother meeting that need. The good-enough mother begins by adapting almost completely to her child’s needs. However, she gradually adapts less and less completely, according to the child's growing ability to cope with her ‘failure’ (Winnicott, ibid). In this way, the child is enabled to become autonomous and learns to cope with disappointments and frustrations, respect others’ limitations and needs, and take responsibility for doing things for her/himself.

The Good Enough concept might be very useful for analysing schools. Such an application does not suggest some idealized perfection but the creation of a ‘potential space’ (Winnicott, 1971). This space enables students to move in a positive direction - developing their independence and enabling them to respond appropriately to setbacks, value others for what they are, and take responsibility for themselves. There are risks associated with the creation of this potential space. As well as creating an opportunity for learning and development, good enough educational practice also creates a possibility that learning and development will not take place, or that actual harm of some kind may result, which are manifestly undesirable outcomes. It is for these reasons that the good enough mother notion is often associated with the provision of a holding environment which provides a secure, contained environment for the developing child. In a parallel sense, pedagogic and organisational practices in educational settings also need to provide a containing environment (James 2011; Dale and James 2013) to obviate the potential for undesirable outcomes. Somewhat paradoxically it is as if a safe educational environment allows risks to be taken. An unsafe learning and organisational environment, which could be called ‘Imperfect’ also allows risks to be taken but such risks are not appropriate and may result in harm. Although our central concern here is with the pressures schools and those who work in schools are under to provide a perfect learning environment, we do recognise there is also a distinction between Good Enough practices and imperfect/unsafe practices. Our central argument however is that an educational environment that is too safe (perfect) does not enable the taking of risks that in turn allow young people to develop into self-managing autonomous learners. For example, a mathematics teacher who feels fully committed to her students' academic success in national exams might teach them to stick blindly to ways of problem solving or focus only on examples of questions from national tests. In turn, she may refrain from seeking for other ways of solving mathematical problems. She believes she is helping the students, protecting
them from harm as she prepares them for ‘the test’ as effectively as possible. In so doing she rules out any opportunities for creative and autonomous learning.

**The boundary between good enough and perfect pedagogic and organisational practices**

Inherent in envisaging good enough and perfect educational and developmental practice is the idea that a boundary of some kind distinguishes the two. Establishing and maintaining such a boundary is clearly problematic for teachers in schools and those responsible for the operation and conduct of schools – staff with leadership and management responsibilities and school governors. It is a substantial issue because it can be the basis for leadership and management decisions of both an operational and a strategic nature.

Eddy Spicer and James (2010) introduce the notion of animating force in relation to boundaries. It is the organisational phenomenon that provides an underlying rationale for boundary formation. The animating force is the central feature of the underlying picture of the empirical world that is used. It may not be immediately apparent and may need to be identified through its effects. In this paper, the animating forces that establish the boundary between practices that define a good enough school and those of a perfect school are of particular interest.

**References**


**Vignette 1**

**Context**

This issue has been raised by a parent of a Year 7 (11/12 year old) girl about the behaviour of boys in her daughter’s Learning Group. The school the girl attends is mixed and non-selective. In year 7, classes are mixed ability. The account is by the girl’s mother.

**The account**

I’m very concerned about sexist behaviour and talk – so called ‘banter’- and it is going on between kids at the school to an extent that I find really very shocking. It may be the particular to the Learning Group my daughter’s in or, maybe to Year 7, or it could be an issue throughout the school. My Year 11 daughter didn't experience it though. I do know the boys outnumber the girls in the Learning Group. That may reflect the make-up of the whole year – I don’t know whether it is contributing to the issue.

Anyway, the apparently accepted type of ‘banter’ between the majority of boys in group, that is all but about four of them according to my daughter’s calculation, is things such as "What did you do last night?" "I had sex with your mother". That kind of ‘banter’ reflects the way many of the boys talk to the girls in the class. My daughter sits between two boys in many lessons – that’s the seating plan - and she is often spoken to by them a very sexist and degrading way.

This matter is of course of concern to me; it is a very difficult thing for a young girl to deal with. But it's also not good for the boys to think this kind of behaviour is OK. I have to say though, it also concerns me as a woman. I have long defined myself as a feminist. Things I read in the papers make it very clear to me that our society is becoming increasingly sexist. My daughter's experience definitely endorses that. It’s very disappointing given all the progress that’s been made over the years.

I might just contact the school discuss my daughter's experience. Actually, I think they could/should address what seems to be a very sexist culture in the school.

**Commentary**

1. One view is that this boys’ behaviour of this kind is impossible to eradicate by any school, that the mother should not go to the school but should tell her daughter to toughen up, unfortunately, you’re going to have to face up to this kind of behaviour. So, either ignore the ‘stupid and ignorant’ boys, or assert herself (with other girls) to challenge their unacceptable behaviour.

2. Another standpoint is that the boys’ behaviour is unacceptable, this kind of thing should not be allowed under any circumstance and the school should act very firmly to eradicate it.

**Discussion points**

1. Should the parent contact the school? Why?
2. When the parent contacts the school, what should the school do and why?
3. What pressures will the school be under when it responds?
4. Which approach will enable most learning? Is it Good Enough?
Vignette 2

Context
This incident concerns a Year 7 (11-12 year old) student – Stephen - the student’s mother and the student tutor that is the teacher in charge of the student’s tutorial group. Several tutorial groups and the tutors were just about to set off for a week-long field trip. It took place in a mixed comprehensive school. The account is by the teacher.

The account
I was getting the student organised to get on the bus, it’s always a bit chaotic. There were a few parents around, it’s nice to have them around at this particular moment, saying good-bye to their children for a whole week – it can be a difficult moment for some parents – and the some students.

Anyway, as I was putting some of the bags on the bus and checking things, Stephen’s Mum came up to me and went to hand me a bottle of medical tablets. “This is Stephen’s medication, he needs to take one tablet every day, they’re for his spots (I think it was for spots – it was something like that anyway, not life threatening) last thing at night, please could you give them to him, two tablets a night and could you keep the tablets in a safe place, you know what he’s like.” I said, “Why not give them to Stephen to look after, I’m sure it’ll be OK and I’m sure he’ll remember” (We had a protocol for students taking medication who were going on the trip and she hadn’t raised the issue before). I was in a rush and didn’t feel this was the moment to get into a discussion over the issue, so I said yes and that I’d sort it.

When we got to the youth hostel we were staying in I found the tablets in my pocket – I’d forgotten all about them if I’m honest – and then went and found Stephen, who’s a nice sensible lad actually, I get on with him fine. I gave him the tablets and told him in no uncertain terms that he should look after them – it was his responsibility – and that he should keep them safe and take them as directed and that if there was any problem with them he’d be for it, and that I’d check at the end of the week that he’d done as he’d been told. He went off very sheeplishly so he knew I meant business. I didn’t check up on him, I forgot all about it if I’m honest. You know what running a field trip for 90 12 year olds is like. I did see him as we were getting back on the bus though and said “All alright with those tablets, Stephen?” He said ‘Yes sir’ I said ‘Good lad, well done’, and left it at that.

Commentary
1. One view is that the school – in this case the teacher - should take full responsibility for the care of the student according to his mother’s wishes, after all the school is in loco parentis on such occasions.
2. Another standpoint is that the teacher in acting the way he did – pushing the responsibility onto the student – enabled the student to take responsibility for his own affairs, and to develop as a result.

Discussion points
1. Did the teacher do the right thing? If so why and if not why not?
2. What learning might result from the actions the teacher took and might have taken?
3. What is Good Enough Practice here? Is this actually poor practice?
4. If you were the headteacher and you subsequently found out what had happened, what would you do? Why?
**Vignette 3**

**Context**

This difficult incident concerns a Year 9 (13-14 year old) student – Samuel, who attends a mixed comprehensive school. His behaviour record at the school is poor, numerous in-school and after school detentions and misbehaviour incidents of various kinds, some violent. The vignette is the deputy’s account of a conversation between the deputy head who has been ‘keeping an eye on him’ and Samuel’s father, as a result of a two day exclusion that the school has imposed for a violent incident with another child which Samuel instigated.

**The account**

I explained the situation to Samuel’s father, Jason he’s called. I said that Samuel had been making progress with controlling his temper – albeit slow progress, and at some considerable cost to the school – but that this incident was a step too far. He said there had been issues between Samuel and the other boy and that the school should have done more to calm things between them for example by counselling them both and/or providing mediation sessions. He said that Samuel’s not naturally violent and that the school should make more allowances – Samuel’s early family life had not been ideal, for sure – and be more understanding.

I explained that we did understand but that Samuel did need to learn to control his behaviour and conform to the standards the school requires. He said Samuel had been doing well with his Development Programme – that’s a programme we put troublesome students on, it helps us to monitor their progress and to reward them as appropriate. I agreed but said that there had been other incidents as his record showed. He wouldn’t accept my point of view and the meeting ended with him saying we should have tried harder to help Samuel before resorting to an exclusion.

**Commentary**

One view is that the school – the deputy headteacher - should have been more understanding, made allowances and offered additional support – perhaps through mediation in this instance - and other strategies to help Samuel manage his behaviour and his school experience generally. In essence, the school needed to help him more.

Another standpoint is that the school has already helped Samuel enough and that he needs to recognise that there are limits. To act any other way would do him a disservice in the long-run. At some stage, he is going to need to fully understand the seriousness of his misbehaviour and that he needs to take full responsibility for his own actions.

**Discussion points**

1. Is the school right in excluding the pupil? Or should the school give him more support? Which strategy will bring about most learning?
2. What are the risks associated with the two strategies?
3. Where is the boundary between perfect and good enough practice here?
**Vignette 4**

**Context**

This incident occurred during the selection process for a deputy headteacher with a curriculum management responsibility at a co-educational secondary school in England. At the last inspection, the school was judged to be good – about 60% of students get five or more A*-C grades at GCSE. The incident occurred when the candidates were allowed to look around the school and to visit lessons. Following the visits, the candidates were invited to feed back to the selection panel. The vignette is the headteacher’s account of the feeding back process.

**The account**

One candidate had visited a number of classes, which impressed the selection panel. When asked what he made of the experience, he was very clear: “I think this school could do with implementing the ‘Three part lesson’ across the whole school. There’s just too much variation, lesson objectives are not written on the board”. One of the governors asked him what the ‘Three part lesson’ was and he explained: “One, introduction; two, activity; and three, plenary discussion – Ofsted love it”. “Oh, like the sermon idea”, the governor replied: “Tell ‘em what you’re going to tell ‘em; tell ‘em; then tell em’ what you’ve told em’: I like that idea, very good. That objectives idea’s a good one too”.

In the discussion amongst the selection panel after, she remained enthusiastic. I explained the disadvantages of the three part lesson dictat essentially that it limits creativity; is a rather stultifying learning diet and it inhibits a spirit of enquiry. She wasn’t convinced: “The students need to know where they stand and if Ofsted think it’s a good idea then OK with me – and we do need to get to 70 A*-Cs. I also liked that idea of writing up the learning objectives on the boards – it makes things very clear”. I thought it best to let things rest there.

**Commentary**

The views of the headteacher and the governor in effect encapsulate the two standpoints. One view – that of the governor and indeed the applicant - is that the three part lesson and making the objectives explicit gives staff and students a clear and secure structure to work within. Such an approach reduces the risk that students may not learn and is therefore bound to enhance learning overall.

An alternative standpoint that of the headteacher is that while the three part lesson has its merits, there is insufficient flexibility to allow students and teachers to explore and to learn and develop through, creative, innovative and different ways of working. They will become dependent of the three part lesson methodology.

**Discussion points**

1. Whose side are you on? The applicant/governor or the headteacher? Why?
2. What are the risks associated with the two approaches?
3. Does this vignette help to illustrate the good enough school concept? Why?