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Searching for excellence in education: knowledge, virtue and presence?

James MacAllister¹, Gale Macleod² & Anne Pirrie³

Abstract: *This article addresses two main questions 1) what is excellence and 2) should epistemic excellence be the main purpose of education? Though references to excellence have become increasingly frequent in UK education policy, these questions are perhaps especially important in Scotland where the curriculum is explicitly for excellence. Following Hirst and Peters, it is hypothesised that if the term 'education' implies possession of a certain breadth of general knowledge and understanding, then the term 'excellence' may imply a deep grasp of a specific body of knowledge. However, after consideration of Dewey's suggestion that being present in the moment is an excellence of childhood, it is concluded that 1) the development of **epistemic excellence** (having a deep grasp of valuable knowledge) should be regarded as **an** educational purpose rather than **the only** educational purpose and 2) pupil engagement with public traditions of knowledge provide necessary but not sufficient conditions for education.*

Key words – Excellence, rhetoric, virtue, knowledge, presence

1. Educational excellence and curriculum purpose

'Ours is a political culture deeply fractured by fundamental moral disagreements. It is also a political culture whose public rhetoric is well-designed to disguise and conceal the extent of that disagreement by invoking an idiom of consensus with regard to values...For what our contemporary political culture requires from those who claim public and political authority is an appearance of virtue congruent with the rhetoric of shared values. And both that appearance and that rhetoric are well served by the indeterminacy of the virtue-concepts of contemporary usage' (MacIntyre, 1991, pp. 6-7)

The notion of excellence has been prominent in much latter day UK educational policy¹. For example, in England the National Teaching Schools Prospectus indicates that all teaching schools must be 'centres of excellence for ITT' (Initial Teacher Training), and that each teaching school must 'ensure that demonstrably excellent practitioners take responsibility for and lead each trainee teachers' training programme' (NCL 2011b, 18). Furthermore, a future function of teaching schools will be to develop and disseminate

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excellent teaching practice (NCL 2010). In view of the increasingly frequent adoption of the vocabulary of excellence in education policy it is probably important to ask what excellence in education might mean; nowhere perhaps more so than in Scotland, where the new school curriculum is explicitly *for* excellence (Scottish Executive 2004). The emphasis on excellence in Scotland seems to have been motivated by a belief amongst the policy makers that previous curricula had not been adequately enabling all pupils to reach their potential. The report of the curriculum review group states that 'although the current curriculum has many strengths, a significant proportion of young people in Scotland are not achieving all that they are capable of' (ibid, 2004, 13). It was thus argued that a *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) could better prepare Scotland's young people for entrance into, and employment in, a society rapidly changing under various global, social, political and economic influences.² The new curriculum is the first in Scotland to encompass provision for the entire period of schooling from 3-18 (Scottish Executive 2004). It has been confirmed that as of 2012/13, pupils will undertake national qualifications in literacy and numeracy, during the 'senior phase' of their secondary schooling, from 3rd year onwards (Kidner 2010, 3). Eight broad curricular areas have been identified, namely: Numeracy and Literacy, Sciences, Expressive Arts, Social Studies, Languages, Religious and Moral Education, Technologies, and Health and Well-being (ibid 2010, 9). There is also to be an emphasis on inter-disciplinary rather than discipline-based study in the areas of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing (ibid 2010, 9). The overarching purpose of the curriculum is to enable *all* young people to develop four 'capacities' of excellence, namely: successful learning, confidence, responsible citizenship and effective contribution.

However, the CfE has not been received without controversy. Priestley and Humes maintain that the 'historical amnesia' and 'lack of theoretical sophistication' (Priestley and Humes 2010, 359) displayed by the architects of the new curriculum has resulted in a conceptual muddle; and that the four capacities of excellence have been subject to too little critical interrogation. They rightly point out that although previous curricula in Scotland were influenced by academic research, (citing the footprints of Hirst and Peters' forms of knowledge view of the curriculum on the Munn Report), the original CfE document did not make any specific appeal to any philosophical, sociological or psychological research into the curriculum. Priestley and Humes (2010) analyse the CfE using three curricular archetypes identified by Kelly (1999), namely curriculum as: 1) content and education as transmission; 2) product and education as instrumental; 3) process and education as development. They suggest that the policy rather unevenly displays features of each curriculum archetype. For them, the CfE simultaneously construes knowledge as: 1) 'something that is constructed by learners on the one hand' (ibid 358); or 2) pre-specified content 'to be acquired and tested on the other' (ibid 358). They conclude that though a CfE initially had 'an implicit emphasis on process' that offered hope that the 'constraining mould' of Scottish education could be broken, more recent documents have regrettably 'constrained this aspiration, potentially reducing the freedom and creativity of teachers and learners, and rendering classrooms predictable, limited and uncreative' (ibid 358-359). We share Priestley and Humes's concern that the new curriculum lacks a coherent underpinning philosophy. However, the main

purpose of this paper is to interrogate different meanings of the term excellence, and to defend the model of curriculum as content and education as *initiation*, as advanced by Hirst and Peters³. Priestley and Humes seem to prefer a conception of the ‘curriculum as process and education as development’ because they consider that the view of curriculum as content tends to encourage teachers to focus upon their subject disciplines ‘rather than [on] any broader conception of the learning process or the personal development of pupils’ (2010, 347).

In this respect, we would agree that personal development is a proper and important end for education and teaching. However, we will argue that though Peters and Hirst did consider that pupils’ engagement with specific bodies of knowledge was crucial to the educational process, they also suggested that the purpose of such engagement with knowledge was the development of excellence.⁴ In defending the continued educational merit of disciplines of knowledge, we are echoing the view of Lindsay Paterson, another prominent critic of CfE. Like Priestley and Humes (2010), he has maintained that the proposed reforms are ‘vague to the point of confusion on too many matters to be a proper basis for new educational practice’ (Paterson 2007). Paterson is forthright about the damaging lack of debate around the policy about the value of human knowledge traditionally made available to pupils through subject disciplines. With regard to traditional subject disciplines he states that the curricular reforms ‘threaten to destroy an inheritance by ignoring it’ (Paterson 2007). Paterson suggests that a subject discipline is more than a ‘mere arbitrary collection of facts, despite what is often implied by the fashionable orthodoxy. It is indeed a deep foundation of factual knowledge’ (Paterson 2009, p 11). We should make it clear that we do not think that *subject* disciplines should be regarded as sacrosanct⁵. Nevertheless, as we contend below, public traditions of theoretical and practical knowledge ought to be regarded as necessary if not sufficient conditions for the promotion of education. We shall argue that pupils must ultimately be supported actively to engage with such traditions if they are to develop any excellence defined as mastery of particular bodies of knowledge. However, in the light of Dewey’s suggestion that being present in the moment is an excellence of childhood, we conclude that the development of knowledge to a degree that could be described as excellent should be **an** educational purpose rather than **the only** educational purpose. We take this stance because there are other valuable human goods distinct from epistemic excellence (like presence and authenticity) that would also seem worthy of attention. We will begin by drawing upon the work of Gillies (2007), Hirst and Peters (1975) and Aristotle (2004) so as to address the question of what excellence in education might mean. As we shall see, recent public rhetoric regarding excellence in education may be ‘designed to disguise and conceal the extent of...disagreement [about divergent notions of excellence] by invoking an idiom of consensus with regard to values’ (MacIntyre 1991, 6-7).

2. Education *for* Excellence

A perusal of the Oxford (OED 1991) and Chambers (Chambers-Cambridge 1998) English Dictionaries suggests there are at least three different ways in which a person may exhibit

'excellence'. Excellence may involve a person: 1) surpassing *others* in performance⁶; 2) surpassing *one's own*⁷ previous performance; 3) having good personal qualities (virtues) in high degree⁸. Each of these notions of excellence may well have some educational merit. However, they are beset by problems too. While the desire to surpass others in performance may motivate some to reach for excellence, it seems somewhat paradoxical to think that *all* pupils can fulfil their potential for excellence, if the hallmark of excellence is surpassing others in performance. For example, if Jane clears 1.70m in the high jump, surpassing the mark set by all of her classmates, then it seems fair to describe her jump as excellent according to the first meaning of the term elaborated here. However, it is hard to see how Jill's jump of 1.10m could be described as excellent according to these standards, if it were lowest height cleared by anyone in the PE class. Gillies (2007) provides a succinct explanation of why reserving the term 'excellent' for only the highest performing pupils is problematic and logically incompatible with the aspiration of attaining excellence for all. He classifies such a notion of excellence as *n-excellence* where *n* represents the *norm* and excellence means not just surpassing this norm, but being placed as highest and best in relation to the norm. He says that 'under such a definition, the promotion and pursuit of excellence is chimerical: it can only apply to a tiny minority (by definition) and attempts by everyone to become excellent are necessarily, logically, doomed to fail' (ibid, 28).

Therefore, to our mind the second, and especially the third meanings of the word elucidated above may offer more fruitful grounds from which to defend a programme of education for excellence for all. To continue with the example, if excellence is about surpassing one's previous performance, then it certainly seems much more plausible to think that the performance of all the pupils in the given PE class could be described as excellent. Of course this could only be said to be the case if all the pupils have in fact surpassed their previous best height. Gillies (2007) classifies such an ipsative (ipsative because the aim is to measure educational improvement in reference to personal performance only rather than any more general criteria) account of excellence as *i-excellence* and concludes that the goal of attaining excellence for all is possible in theory within this notion of excellence so long as all pupils continue to achieve personal bests. However, Gillies (2007) is also probably right to suggest that if the measure of excellence becomes entirely self-referential then mediocrity may ensue. Having some more general criteria of excellence may serve as a motivation for pupils to reach higher than they would otherwise without a target of reference beyond themselves. Therefore, the concept of *c-excellence* (where *c* refers to general *criteria* of excellence) is considered by Gillies (2007) as an alternative way of measuring excellence. However, he again urges caution. He states that though 'c-excellence is theoretically possible, actually achieving it seems less so. To have every school and every pupil reaching standards of excellence is at best utopian and at worst delusional. To achieve excellence for all, one would think, would require the standards to be set quite low, and so not 'excellent' at all' (ibid p 29). We think Gillies touches on an important point here – that if excellence is used too liberally and vaguely within educational discourse, then there is a very real danger that the word will lose its very meaning, and with that, there will be diminished potential to identify pupils' achievements that are genuinely outstanding (and for particular reasons) as opposed to unsatisfactory, satisfactory or good. If all the notions of excellence considered so far seem problematical, then why might the notion of education for excellence have come to prominence at all?

There is undoubtedly a large rhetorical symbolism at play here term. Indeed, we think recent use of the term excellence bears the hallmarks of a public rhetoric that invokes an idiom of agreement that conceals as much as it reveals (MacIntyre, 1991). In this respect Gillies (2007) suggests that the new Labour Government may have adopted the mantra of excellence for all as a way of distancing itself politically from its conservative counterparts. As Gillies (2007) points out, much of the rhetorical emphasis during the time of new Labour was on the provision of excellent schools rather than on excellent performance amongst individuals. This is perhaps because the achievement of excellent outcomes for all pupils is a rhetorical rather than realistic goal in the first place. However in Scotland, the four capacities that underpin the CfE appear to be aspirational statements about the sorts of personal qualities worth fostering in pupils (Priestley and Humes 2010) rather than descriptions of how to improve pupil performance or school provision. While it is certainly encouraging to see education policy makers in Scotland explicitly valuing the development of the pupil as a whole person, the vagueness of the four capacities is rather striking (Paterson 2007; Priestley and Humes 2010). Indeed, we think the vagueness of the four capacities may hide from view the very specific bodies of knowledge and skills with which teachers ought to be acquainting their pupils, in the mutual search for elusive excellence.

Where, then, might some measure of clarity be found regarding how schools can promote excellence? It is our view that the broadly liberal variety of education as initiation into valuable knowledge that is advanced by Peters, Hirst and Aristotle can offer some insight into the question of how to educate for excellence. Indeed, we think that they can offer more secure philosophical foundations for a curriculum founded on the idea of educating for excellence than the rather opaque four capacities. We also think that consideration of different disciplines of knowledge to be studied by pupils might offer a basis from which criteria can be developed to help discriminate between pupils who have attained a genuine grasp of an aspect of knowledge and those that have yet to achieve this. (This is broadly in line we think with Gillies's notion of c-excellence).

“Education”...suggests passing on the ultimate values of a community, so that the individual can make them his own. “Education” suggests not only that what develops in someone is valuable but also that it involves the development of knowledge and understanding. Whatever else an educated person is, he is one who has some understanding of something. (Peters 1972 p 3)

In *Education and the Educated Man* (1972) Richard Peters suggested that educated persons are, in an important sense, defined by their ability to *understand* a given matter. Peters explains that the modern concept of the educated person arose in the nineteenth century, and differentiated those who had been trained in some specialist skill or knowledge from those who had been broadly educated. He states that ‘we distinguish educating people from training them because for us education is no longer compatible with any narrowly conceived enterprise’ (Peters 1972, 10). He specifies that the ‘educated’ necessarily come to understand *knowledge* that is of *value*. For Peters, education involves the idea of a community passing on knowledge that has more than instrumental value. He also specified that education ‘must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not

inert' and that 'education at least rules out some procedures of transmission, on the grounds that they lack the wittingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner' (Peters 1970, 45). Thus we think Peters is clear that educational activities do not involve pupils passively receiving knowledge; pupils must rather be supported to voluntarily engage with and think about valuable knowledge so as to develop their understanding of it.

It is often overlooked that Hirst and Peters (1975, 57) suggest that 'human excellences such as autonomy, creativeness and integrity could surely be regarded as aims of education as well as culminating points of development'. It is our view that although Peters and Hirst did consider pupil engagement with knowledge as crucial to the educational process, they also suggested that the purpose of such engagement with knowledge was the development of human excellence, construed more broadly. They explain that a person may demonstrate a particular excellence whilst lacking the breadth of knowledge indicative of the state of being 'educated'. Conversely, they also suggest that a person can be broadly educated without having acquired any specific excellences (ibid p 58). Perhaps then, the *educated* have attained a certain *breadth* of knowledge and/or skills. By contrast, *excellence* might be ascribed to the person who has a particularly deep grasp of a more *specific* body of knowledge, or the ability to perform a particular practical task with great precision and care. While Hirst and Peters imply that excellence is most evident when 'rational capacities' are developed 'to the full' (ibid, 53), this stipulation need not preclude distinctively practical and experiential activities from promoting education or excellence. Hirst and Peters stress that human excellences are qualities of mind and experience (ibid p 55). Furthermore, they indicate that excellences must 'be displayed in specific activities which have their own specific standards...It is also the case that particular skills may have to be mastered for these excellences to develop in full' (ibid p 54). This suggests to us that in their scheme of thought the emergence of excellence requires a thorough and deep engagement with specific bodies of theoretical and/or practical knowledge. Seen in this light Hirst and Peters' account of education for excellence seems to have a significant virtue ethical dimension. Hirst and Peter's account of educational excellence certainly bears more than a passing resemblance to that provided by Aristotle centuries before. Furthermore, Hirst and Peters do cite Aristotle's notion of human potentiality for excellence when attempting to ground their claim that human excellences are extremely important to their concept of personal development.

For Aristotle, human beings prosper when they develop their natural moral and intellectual capacities to the full. To be virtuous meant being able to develop and thereafter consistently exercise one's natural aptitudes. He theorised that human excellence (*anthropine arête*) involved the exercise of a broad range of intellectual qualities and moral character traits (virtues) that in turn promoted long term human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle thought that people have a natural capacity (*dunamis*) for moral virtue that required habit for its full development (NE, 1103a24-27). For Aristotle, the virtuous dispositions that frame 'the good life' consist 'of actualisations, not of potentialities' (Frankena 1970, 20). Moreover, each person's potential to actualise virtue in their life is in one important sense relative to the natural capacities of each person (NE, 1106a33).⁹ Aristotle implied that the natural potential for virtue with which nature endows each person only becomes mature through repeated

performance and action (NE, 1103a27-1103b2). Importantly he emphasises that moral virtues and craft-type technical skills only develop over time and if their habitual practice is also accompanied by teaching (NE, 1103b9-15). Similarly, he specifies that teaching is required for the development of the intellectual virtues too (NE, 1103a14-17). Sherman (2004, 180) concludes that in so far as Aristotle's 'capacities are not latent excellences, a teacher must be on hand' to oversee development.

Zagzebski (1996) draws upon Aristotle to suggest that not all excellences are virtues; virtues are, for her, specific excellences that are especially central to a person's identity. She maintains that a virtue makes a person good whereas excellence may not. We think that Zagzebski is right to infer that in Aristotle's philosophy the intellectual and moral virtues are excellences that enrich a person's life in the long term¹⁰. A virtue is much more than a one-off achievement of excellence. It is rather a deeply desirable habit of action and/or mode of thought that gives meaning and value to a person's life in an enduring way. We therefore think that virtues may be excellences that are especially worth educating. In this respect, an important distinction can be made between an *excellent achievement*, say a high mark in a history exam, and an *intellectual virtue*. The knowledge required to pass a school exam with aplomb may be forgotten or lose value if the person does not revisit that knowledge and takes no further interest in the subject. However, the person of intellectual virtue would want to carry on learning and exercising their mental faculties in a way that imbued their life with value and meaning. The intellectually virtuous have not only developed their minds then, they also continue learning throughout life and for its own sake. If such virtue is educationally desirable (as we believe it is), then it is important that teachers aim to 'pass on' their love of knowledge to their pupils in order to fuel a lifelong engagement with it amongst their pupils. In contrast, merely teaching to the test would not seem like the best means to achieve such a teleological attitude to learning in school pupils. Thus far, we have looked at three definitions of excellence and have found the first two wanting. The third meaning – excellence as virtue, seems to us to offer the most potential as a way of understanding the desire to educate *for* excellence. We shall now explore whether initiation into traditions of knowledge is a prerequisite for excellence and education, and if this is all education should be for. As we shall see, Aristotle, Hirst and Peters all broadly defended the idea of initiating the young into valuable knowledge as the primary means of developing excellence and/or virtue.

3. Traditions of knowledge and educational excellence

Yet, if the good life includes excellent activities and if education for it includes the formation of dispositions to act in accordance with standards of excellence, then education for the good (as well as for the moral) life entails some kind of teaching and learning of standards (Frankena 1970, 36)

The capacity in CfE that most obviously links to knowledge is that of successful learning (Scottish Executive 2004). But what is it to be a 'successful learner'? Is 'learning how to learn' a distinct capacity that is prerequisite for excellence in learning in other areas? Christopher Winch (2008) has recently addressed the latter question. He argues that 'learning

how to learn' is not a general mental power but rather relies on a set of specific abilities. Winch puts it thus: 'if I do have a capacity for learning, I won't need an ability to learn, let alone an ability to learn how to learn' (Winch 2008, 651). He rather concludes that the 'capacity to learn must, in many cases...be supplemented by specific abilities to do certain things' (Winch 2008, 651). He explains that it is such *specific abilities* as literacy, numeracy, speaking, listening and moral virtue that are transferable and can 'be put to work in a variety of contexts in order to assist further learning' (Winch 2008, 651). Aristotle, centuries before, made much the same point. He specified that the young must learn to read and write, as these qualities 'are often the means to learning yet further subjects' (PolI 338a 39-40). However, Biesta (2009, 39) has suggested that the focus in CfE on developing the personal qualities of pupils has led to less focus on the important matter of '*what* pupils and students learn and what they learn it *for*'. We are inclined to agree with this, as well as Biesta's more recent observation that 'if we give up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and make them into facilitators of learning, we do, in a sense, give up on the very idea of education' (2012, p)¹¹. Might it be concluded then that acquainting pupils with certain traditions of knowledge is necessary for successful learning and educational excellence?

We think it is plausible to suppose, as Peters (1972) and Aristotle (1981) seem to have done, that engagement with traditions of practical and theoretical knowledge is a necessary prerequisite for the development of excellence in a given domain of knowledge, precisely because such traditions do, to a degree, enshrine standards of excellence in the given discipline. While Peters advocated eight forms of knowledge as a platform for excellence, Aristotle indicated that four things are to be taught to children in their preparation for a life of virtue: reading and writing; physical training; music; and drawing (Politics, 1337b23-26). Aristotle does emphasise that learning is not play – the attainment of excellence and virtue requires effort and sacrifice. With these broadly liberal accounts of education in mind, it is our view that public traditions of theoretical and practical knowledge ought to be regarded as necessary if not sufficient conditions for the promotion of education. Furthermore, we also think pupils must be supported to actively and habitually engage with such traditions if they are to develop epistemic excellence (a deep grasp of a specific body of valuable knowledge), and that such educational excellence probably requires substantial effort and achievement on the part of the pupil. Two important clarifications should be noted here.

First, to suggest that some sort of engagement with practical or theoretical knowledge is necessary for the eventual development of excellence in respect to that knowledge is not to suggest that all learning activities must involve direct engagement with such bodies of knowledge. The cultivation of motivation and interest often precedes disciplined study (Dewey, 2007, MacAllister, 2012b). It is therefore perhaps the case that pupils will only come to pursue standards of excellence in a given activity if they are sufficiently motivated and interested in that given aspect of knowledge, experience or sphere of activity. Teacher and learner both bear a responsibility to locate the intrinsic purpose of and interest in a given aspect of experience, skill or knowledge, if that knowledge, skill or experience is to be brought to life, let alone in a way that may promote the eventual development of excellence.

Secondly, by arguing that engagement with traditions of knowledge is a necessary condition for the development of epistemic excellence, we do not mean to suggest that traditions of knowledge are in any way fixed and unalterable for all time. Traditions do, and often need to, evolve, as the majority of human knowledge is very probably contingent in nature.

‘For tradition, properly understood, means tradere, an active passing on, a living transmission of the resources of the past into the present so as to enable us to consciously shape the future, not a passive acceptance or re-endorsement of everything that is merely given’. (Passerin d’Entrèves 1987, 241)

Passerin d’ Entrèves (1987) suggests that Aristotle does not offer a prescriptive account of tradition, but rather a view that traditions are to be ‘actively passed on’, so that life can be made anew. Carr (2003) also indicates that great cultural traditions are concerned less with engendering broad acceptance of current social convention and more with a continual search for *truth*. And such search for truth in Aristotle’s ethical theory is especially concerned with the active development of one’s potential: it is ‘above all a matter of making *myself*’ more virtuous (Carr 2003, 259). Spangler (1998) broadly concurs with this view, and believes that Aristotle’s theory of teaching is reliant upon the active intellectual effort and engagement of the pupil: ‘without this active principle, the teacher could not achieve his purpose...the teacher...must depend upon the light of reason within the student’ (17). Educational excellence will then probably depend upon pupils being prepared to commit themselves to mindful, disciplined and sustained, study and practice of a given skill or body of knowledge¹².

In sum, although it is probably not desirable or possible to reach universal assent regarding what counts as ‘valuable knowledge’, it would nevertheless seem important that teachers, pupils, academics and policy makers alike engage in dialogue with each other about what substantive knowledge could or should be part of the school curriculum and why. The confusion and anxiety some Scottish teachers report regarding the implementation of CfE (Priestley and Minty 2012) may in part be attributable to the overly brief and cursory comments in the policy about what counts as valuable knowledge, and why. It appears that some teachers in Scotland feel that knowledge is disappearing from the new curriculum and/or that the principle of interdisciplinary learning may undermine the importance of subject-based knowledge (Priestley and Minty 2012). If there is substance to these misgivings, then the idea of educating for excellence may become harder to realise than before. If excellence is to be the object of education, and if (as Hirst and Peters suggest) ‘excellence’ is characterised by great depth of knowledge and/or high standards of practical performance in specific domains, then it would seem even more important that the expert knowledge of teachers is valued, and that disciplined, domain-specific practice and study on the part of pupils is encouraged. However, the account of education for excellence provided above is very much centred on knowledge. We believe that education should have broader ends in view than just the refinement and extension of pupils’ knowledge. This is why we think that engagement with traditions of knowledge is necessary but not sufficient condition for education. In this respect, Dewey gestures towards a different notion of excellence, one

that invites the question of whether or not the development and pursuit of excellence in respect of the acquisition of knowledge should be the *only or primary* educational goal.

4. Should excellence in respect of knowledge be *the only purpose of education*?

‘Children proverbially live in the present; that is not only a fact not to be evaded, but it is an excellence. The future just as future lacks urgency and body’. (Dewey 2007 p 45)

We have suggested that to educate for excellence might entail sacrificing *breadth* of knowledge and performance for *depth* of knowledge and performance. If this is the case, should such a shift of educational focus be welcomed? It certainly seems desirable enough for education to aim at promoting good personal qualities, like virtues, in pupils, in addition to deep disciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, if pursuit of such valuable excellences were to mean that pupils engaged in more depth with a smaller range of learning material, then perhaps pupils’ engagement in education would be enhanced. In theory at least, pupils could be focussing more time on what they enjoy learning about and less time on what they do not. However, greater time spent on striving for excellence in one activity inevitably means less time for other activities. If genuine educational excellence requires pupils to engage to a significant degree with disciplinary knowledge (as we are so far suggesting), then is there a danger that any curriculum *for* excellence so construed will tend to promote educational activities that are too exclusively focussed on fostering one form of excellence (excellence in knowledge) to the neglect of the experience of living in the present.

Nearly a hundred years ago Dewey (2007) remarked that the capacity of children to dwell in the present, rather than the future, ought to be cherished in itself as an excellence as well as a prerequisite for educational activities. We take the view that the ability to be wholly present in the moment is not *in itself* an excellence of childhood, for a child could be very present in a given moment whilst doing something decidedly undesirable like bullying or hitting another child. Nevertheless, we are sympathetic to Dewey’s wider point that educators should not neglect pupils’ current interests and experiences when undertaking school activities. However, if education is *only* for the *development of* excellence in respect to the acquisition of knowledge, then there is the risk that a significant portion of pupils will be marginalised by the education system. In this regard it is interesting to note that in an inquiry into the purposes of education conducted prior to the inception of CfE with Scottish school leavers, academic achievement and prowess were deemed by some to be the ultimate barometer of educational success, often to the detriment of engagement in schools of pupils who were not academically orientated (Pirrie and Lowden 2004). A narrow focus on epistemic excellence then may do little to re-engage pupils who already feel alienated by an achievement-driven school system. The reality is that many pupils attend school every day with other things on their mind than being or becoming excellent. A curriculum that only aims to develop excellence through engagement with disciplines of knowledge may not value enough the reality and diversity of pupils’ experience. The sole pursuit of epistemic excellence in education may not just tend to downplay the worth of *all* pupils’ present experience: it may also come at the expense of a good general education.

Biesta (2011) argues that educators have a responsibility to maintain spaces where freedom and individual uniqueness can appear. He suggests that if educational processes are too

focused upon the deliberate development of the individual, then important opportunities for pupils *to come into presence* (to exist that is, as a unique person now because of the presence of another) may be lost. While Strike (1982) is perhaps right to suggest that too great an emphasis on individual authenticity in education may lead to pupil narcissism, he does stress that autonomy and authenticity are nevertheless both important human values. To create environments where pupils can develop their understanding of specific bodies of knowledge is no doubt a vital educational endeavour, and probably a human good. However, to do so at the expense of providing pupils with sufficient freedom to be and become authentic persons may be to sacrifice opportunity for the cultivation of other important human goods. We are therefore inclined to think that epistemological excellence (having a deep grasp of a given body of knowledge) should be *an* educational purpose rather than *the only* educational purpose. We think that schools should be places where independent and authentic thinking, being and acting are valued rather than just the demonstration or pursuit of excellence in specific domains of knowledge¹³. They should also we think provide space at times for pupils to feel free from the demands of being or becoming excellent. It is self-evident that it will not be possible for some pupils to perform to a level that is described as excellent in relation to achievement in a particular subject area. There is the risk that such pupils may disengage from schooling if the remote target of excellent academic achievement is all that is held before them as important or worth working towards.

To conclude, it seems to us that the four capacities of the CfE are laudable in intent but ambiguous in detail, much like the wider notion of educating for excellence that also animates the Scottish curriculum. At face value there would appear to be nothing questionable about the basic aspiration to help all school pupils to reach their highest potential. However, this aspiration may be a rhetorical rather than realistic one. Indeed, while Priestley and Minty (2012) found that a majority of Scottish educators consulted about the CfE in one local authority were broadly sympathetic to the educational purposes enshrined in the four capacities of excellence - some of the same Scottish educators also reported finding the policy documents 'woolly and 'vague'. This is perhaps unsurprising. For as MacIntyre (1991) so pithily observes, policy makers are often wont to invoke the language of excellence and virtue in a rather rhetorical manner without embracing any specific concept of virtue, or providing any clear account about how such virtue might be developed. We therefore think that questions should be posed about the intended and possible meanings of educational excellence whenever it is employed in education policy; and about how schools might best promote educational excellence when this is called for in policy. In this article we have considered the possibility that while the *educated* pupil may have attained a certain *breadth* of knowledge and/or skills, the *excellent pupil* might rather have a particularly deep grasp of a more *specific* body of knowledge, or the ability to perform a particular practical task with great precision and skill.

We have though contended that public traditions of theoretical and practical knowledge ought to be regarded as necessary if not sufficient conditions for the promotion of education. We think pupils must ultimately be supported to actively shape and engage with such traditions for themselves, if they are to develop true excellence in respect to knowledge. However, we also take the view that the current experiences and capacities of pupils should also be deemed as educationally important, and that too narrow a focus on excellence in relation to academic achievement and knowledge may jeopardise this. We have also suggested that Scottish educators should seek to promote virtue at least as much as excellence amongst their pupils as excellence may only refer to a one-off achievement while virtues are intrinsically valuable character traits that promote human flourishing in the long term. There

will probably never be universal agreement though about what particular qualities (or virtues) are most worth cultivating in young people, or the specific bodies of knowledge, experiences and skills with which they should be invited to engage. Neither is there likely to be consensus about how pupils should be taught. However, it seems essential that teachers, policy makers, pupils and academics discuss these matters openly and in some depth. There is a danger that the alluring rhetoric of excellence evident in recent education policy may push such deeper conversations to the margins rather than promote them. The purpose of employing notions of excellence in educational policy may well be largely rhetorical. However, in practice education should reflect purposes above and beyond the development of excellence, and ones that are founded on more than rhetoric.

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NOTES

¹ The emphasis on excellence in education has certainly not been restricted to the UK either, but is rather evident across the Anglophone world (Priestley 2010 and Gillies 2007). Gillies (2007, 20) notes that a ‘Google search for ‘excellence + education’ will generate more than 249 million hits on the World Wide Web’.

² For helpful summary and commentary on the various government reports published in relation to a CfE, see *SPICe’s Briefing Curriculum for Excellence* (Kidner, 2010) and Priestley and Humes (2010). For an analysis of the extent to which the curriculum for excellence may promote care in Scottish schools see Hedge and Mackenzie (2012).

³ We employ ‘initiation’ rather than ‘transmission’ here as the former term was the one Peters chose to use when describing the educational process, and because the latter term does not do justice to the extent to which Peters thought education must involve pupils wilfully and actively developing their minds. The term transmission in contrast implies that pupils are rather passive in the educational process, a view Peters seems to specifically counsel against (1970, 45).

⁴ Priestley and Humes (2010, 355) also suggest that the curriculum ought to be based on the ‘accumulated wisdom of the world’ citing Dewey in this respect.

⁵ We are of course following Hirst here who says that: ‘School subjects in the disciplines as we at present have them are in no way sacrosanct...They are necessarily selections from the forms of knowledge that we have’ (Hirst 1968, 135-6).

⁶ The (OED, 1991) states that the word excellence derives from the Latin root word ‘*excellere*’ - meaning to surpass. The state of excelling thus means to surpass in merit or quality. The (Chambers-Cambridge 1998) specifies that being excellent involves surpassing *others* in good quality.

⁷ The (OED, 1991) states that excelling oneself involves surpassing ones own previous performance.

⁸ The (Chambers-Cambridge 1998) suggests that a person of great virtue has good qualities in high degree.

⁹ Each person’s potential for virtue may be limited by their natural capacity, for it. However, we think assessment against valid criteria of performance ought to nevertheless be an integral part of helping all pupils to acquire genuinely valuable excellences. To recognise that different people have aptitudes relative to their nature is not to argue that there are no more general criteria of excellence that all should reach for too.

¹⁰ We think her suggestion that Aristotle’s intellectual virtues are species of moral virtues is quite mistaken. For further discussion of this see MacAllister (2012a).

¹¹ Biesta (2012) draws on the thought of Levinas to argue that though teachers may not be able to directly produce the experience of being taught; the constructivist turn in education, where learning is conceived to be much more important than teaching, ought to nevertheless be resisted.

¹² However, if teachers are to help pupils to actively develop virtue, and other different types of knowledge to an excellent degree then it also seems important that they too possess something of these qualities.

¹³ We should add that such authentic thinking, acting and being should be valued for *all* pupils and not just pupils of a non-academic bent.

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