

THE EDUCATIVE IMPORTANCE OF ETHOS

by TERENCE McLAUGHLIN, *Institute of Education, University of London*

ABSTRACT: This article explores the educative importance of ethos from a broadly philosophical perspective. It is argued that, for a range of reasons, the notion of ethos in the context of education needs to be brought into clearer focus. An analysis is offered of the concept of ethos, with particular reference to the context of classrooms and schools. The educative importance of ethos is explored, with reference to a range of difficulties and challenges which it presents.

Keywords: atmosphere, character, climate, culture, education, ethos, example, habit, schools, tradition, values

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of ‘ethos’ is notoriously difficult to bring into clear focus in the context of teaching and schooling, as elsewhere. The educative importance of ethos is, however, widely acknowledged. One aspect of this acknowledgement involves specific claims about the relationship between ethos and particular educational ‘outcomes’ based on empirical research purporting to show a link of some kind between the two. Thus the Consultative Green Paper, *Schools: Building on Success*, claims that ‘... evidence suggests that schools with a strong sense of identity or ethos perform best’ (DfEE, 2001, 4.11; compare, for example, Mortimore *et al.* 1988; Rutter *et al.* 1979). Another aspect of the acknowledgement of the educative importance of ethos arises from reflection upon the complex nature of educative influence itself. Philosophers, for example, are interested in ethos because of its close relationship with Aristotelian emphases on educational influence as involving the shaping of the dispositions, virtues, character and practical judgment of persons in a milieu in which tradition, habit and emulation play an important role.

Ethos is relatively underexplored as a form of educative influence by educational researchers, philosophers of education, educational policy makers and teachers and educational leaders at classroom and school level. The range of educational issues and questions which

arise in relation to 'ethos' have not, of course, been totally neglected, not least because they are often dealt with in terms of related notions such as 'culture', 'climate' and the like, or by the invocation of 'ethos' in some unanalysed sense. What has been lacking, however, is the widely felt need for a more detailed and precise focus upon the notion of ethos itself and its educative importance. The educative importance of 'ethos' is worthy of detailed exploration for a number of reasons.

First, regardless of the specific perspective from which the matter is viewed, the 'ethos' of teaching and schooling is clearly a significant part of the overall educational experience of students, and, some have argued, the most important part (Williams, 2000, p. 76). As indicated above, an ethos of teaching and schooling not only facilitates (in a way which may be apt for appropriate empirical investigation) the kinds of educative influence which teachers and schools seek to exert, but also in an important sense constitutes and embodies (significant aspects of) that influence. Any proper understanding of the processes of educative influence aimed at by teachers and schools is therefore incomplete in the absence of attention to ethos (on the general significance of ethos in the formation of children and young people see, for example, Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Second, 'ethos' has featured prominently in recent developments in relation to educational policy in the UK and Ireland. For example, the Consultative Green Paper referred to above articulates proposals for the enhancement of the diversity of secondary schooling and for all secondary schools to be encouraged '... to develop a distinctive mission and ethos' (DfEE, 2001, 4.12) and to make a distinctive contribution to the educational system as a whole beyond the teaching of the National Curriculum, as faith schools, specialist schools, beacon schools and the like (*op cit*, 4.13–4.26). In addition, schools are encouraged to offer 'education with character', the most important feature of which is seen as the ethos of the school (*op cit*, 4.77). Further, proposals are made in the Green Paper to ensure that school ethos 'is given the attention it deserves' including discussions with OFSTED about how inspection can give greater recognition to ethos and with the National College for School Leadership about how heads and prospective heads can understand how a positive ethos can be established and sustained (*ibid*). Many aspects of the proposals relating to school ethos were retained in the subsequent White Paper (DfES, 2001, ch. 5). Guidance recently published in relation both to citizenship education and to personal, social and health education has emphasised the importance of aspects of the life of schools which can be broadly described in terms of 'ethos' (Qualifications and

Curriculum Authority 2000a, pp. 10–18; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2000b, pp. 6–8). The ethos of the school is one of the matters which is emphasised for attention by the Department for Education and Skills in Home–School agreements (>www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement<). In the case of faith schools in the maintained sector, whether Foundation or Voluntary schools with a religious character, the Governors have a legal duty to secure an ethos statement from the school as part of the process of determining its specific aims and values (see, for example, >www.natsoc.org.uk/schools/curriculum/ethos<). The ethos of faith schools is also an important focus of attention in the inspection of these schools (see, for example, Catholic Education Service, 1999). In Northern Ireland, school ‘ethos’ is seen as an important matter of concern (see, for example, Donnelly, 2000). The concept of school ethos has been particularly emphasised in Scotland in relation to ‘ethos indicators’ (Scottish Office Education Department and HM Inspectors of Schools 1992a, 1992b) and in recent initiatives in Ireland associated with School Culture and Ethos Project based in the Marino Institute of Education in Dublin (Canavan and Monahan, 2000; Furlong and Monahan, 2000). A clear understanding of the educative importance of ethos is therefore important if current educational policy is to be fully understood and evaluated.

Third, a critical grasp of the educative importance of ethos enables a range of important questions relating to the role of ethos in classrooms and schools, including the recognition, assessment and improvement of ethos, to be identified and tackled by teachers and educational leaders in an appropriate way.

In this essay, I engage in a broadly philosophical exploration of the notion of ethos in the context of teaching and schooling with the aim of bringing the educative importance of ethos into clearer focus. Any full consideration of the educative importance of ethos necessarily involves a wide range of different forms of enquiry and research, including, for example, ethnographic studies of particular teachers and schools. The present discussion, therefore, in its focus on broadly philosophical considerations of a fundamental character, leaves many important issues and considerations to one side which require attention in a fuller account.

2. THE CONCEPT OF ETHOS

The concept of ‘ethos’ is notoriously difficult to analyse for at least two reasons. First, the concept of ethos is closely akin to, and often described in terms of, related notions such as ‘ambience’, ‘atmosphere’,

'climate', 'culture', 'ethical environment' and the like (see Allder, 1993, p. 60; Donnelly 2000, Glover and Coleman, 2005; Haydon, forthcoming; Solvason, 2005). It is therefore difficult to focus attention on the specific meaning of ethos for the purposes of analysis and discussion. Second, the intangibility and elusiveness of the notion of ethos can be seen in the wide range of aspects of the life and work of the classroom and school through which it is manifested and in the wide range of modes of influence in which it is embodied. This wide range of aspects and modes can be illustrated by reference to the recent Scottish and Irish initiatives in relation to school ethos. The Scottish Initiative identifies twelve 'ethos indicators': pupil morale, teacher morale, teachers' job satisfaction, the physical environment, the learning context, teacher-pupil relationships, equality and justice, extra-curricular activities, school leadership and discipline (Scottish Office Education Department and HM Inspectors of Schools 1992a, 1992b, appendix one). The Irish initiative specifies 21 aspects of school life which determines ethos, including symbols/icons/emblems, rituals and ceremonies, communication systems and relationships with parents (Canavan and Monahan, 2000 Information sheet 13, cf. sheets 9 and 10. See also Furlong and Monahan 2000). In relation to England and to faith schools, the Church of England identifies thirteen aspects of the ethos of a church school and offers 24 questions as guidance for ethos-related issues to be raised with headteachers and governors (>www.natsoc.org.uk/schools/curriculum/ethos<). Any aspect of the life and work of classrooms and schools and any mode of influence within classrooms and schools can be seen as apt for the manifestation of an ethos.

A good starting point for an exploration of the notion of ethos is Margaret Allder's claim that 'ethos' is a 'frontier word' in virtue of its closeness to the edges of linguistic expressibility. 'Ethos' is rendered intelligible in her view by 'connecting words' (such as 'ambience', 'spirit', 'atmosphere' and 'climate') which have clearer meanings and which, by lending some of their meaning to the notion of 'ethos', enable the meaning of 'ethos' itself to be illuminated and discerned (Allder, 1993).¹ From this approach via the consideration of 'connecting words', Allder draws out the following conclusions about the meaning of 'ethos': that it refers *inter alia* to human activities and behaviour, to the human environment within which these enterprises take place (especially the social system of an organisation), to behaviour and activity which has already occurred, to a mood or moods which are pervasive within this environment, to social interactions and their consequences, to something which is experienced, to norms rather than to exceptions, and to something

that is unique (Allder, 1993, pp. 63–69). Whilst a number of Allder's points invite critical probing (for example, the meaning and justification of her claim that an ethos is 'unique')² her account covers a good deal of ground in relation to ethos in a useful way.

Whilst Allder takes ethos as the central point of reference in her enquiry, other related notions (such as culture – not considered by Allder) have been argued for various reasons to be preferable to 'ethos' in the discussion of educational influence. For Solvason, ethos is the *product* of the culture of the school (and we might add of the classroom), and 'culture' is seen as a preferred category of analysis because of its greater 'solidity' and accessibility: 'School culture is a tangible entity, whereas ethos is far more nebulous, always retaining a vagueness' (2005, p. 87). Glover and Coleman do not indicate any overall preference for any one of the terms 'climate', 'ethos' and 'culture' in the light of their review of the use of these terms in a range of educational research, although they argue that there is something to be gained from a consistent use of the terms by researchers (2005, p. 266). Haydon regards 'culture' as too broad a concept to capture his interest in the climate of values in which people live and in which young people grow up, but prefers the notion of an 'ethical environment' to that of an ethos as a category of analysis of his focus of interest (Haydon, forthcoming). The appropriateness or otherwise of the concept of 'ethos' for the analysis of educative influence cannot be settled in a final way, and depends in part on the specific interests of particular researchers. Researchers more interested in empirical research may favour concepts such as 'culture', whilst those with a focus of interest beyond the school, such as Haydon, may favour terms such as 'environment'.

There is some consistency among researchers in their use of the term 'ethos'. Glover and Coleman argue that the term tends to be used in relation to more general, 'subjective' and less measurable features of the atmosphere of schools, such as the relationship between people and the values and principles underpinning policy and practice (2005, pp. 257–259). For Eisner, ethos refers to '... the underlying deep structure of a culture, the values that animate it, that collectively constitute its way of life' (1994, frontispiece). Eisner sees ethos as relating to the core values of the school and to that which is deep and fundamental in its life and work. Eisner makes the important point that there can be an important gap between what the school espouses with respect to ethos and what the ethos of the school actually is, and this potential gap is addressed in an interesting way by Donnelly (2000).

Donnelly makes a distinction between a 'positivist' and an 'anti-positivist' viewpoint in relation to ethos. The 'positivist' viewpoint holds that ethos is '... an objective phenomenon, existing independently of the people and social events in an organisation' (2000, p. 135). At first sight, this formulation brings to mind Ryle's illustration of the notion of a 'category mistake' via the case of a person who has been introduced to the functions of the various players and officials in the game of cricket (bowlers, batsmen, fielders, umpires, scorers and the like) and then proceeds to ask whose role it is to exercise *esprit de corps*. As Ryle points out, team spirit is not a determinate task to be undertaken, but '... roughly, the keenness with which each of the tasks is performed, and performing a task keenly is not performing two tasks' (1949, p. 17).³ Similarly, we might wonder whether a 'category mistake' is involved in the identification of an ethos as an independently existing objective phenomenon. In fact, Donnelly is drawing attention to an important aspect of an ethos: its formal documentary expression by an authority as a set of prescriptive values for a school, as in the case of ecclesiastical authorities in the specification of a 'Catholic ethos' for Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. Donnelly is concerned to investigate the relationship between such formal expressions of ethos (an 'aspirational ethos') and an 'anti-positivist' perspective on ethos which focuses upon ethos in the lived reality of classrooms and schools emerging *inter alia* in social interaction. One of Donnelly's main concerns is to explore the relationship between formal and real expressions of ethos and the tensions and contradictions between the two in a Catholic and in a Grant-Maintained Integrated school in Northern Ireland.

Needless to say, in trying to achieve a greater clarity about the notion of an ethos, there is no question of searching for a single 'correct' meaning to which appeal can be made, but rather a task of attempting to embrace, in as full a way as possible, a range of meanings of the term which can yield a persuasive definition with practical uses and benefits in its application to educational influence. The following account is therefore offered in a preliminary way as a basis for further discussion, conscious of its potential limitations and difficulties.

At the most general level, an ethos can be regarded as the prevalent or characteristic tone, spirit or sentiment informing an identifiable entity involving human life and interaction (a 'human environment' in the broadest sense) such as a nation, a community, an age, a literature, an institution, an event and so forth. An ethos is evaluative in some sense and is manifested in many aspects of the entity in question and *via* many modes of pervasive influence. The influence of an ethos is seen in the shaping of human perceptions, attitudes, beliefs,

dispositions and the like in a distinctive way which is implicated in that which is (in some sense) established. Although ethos most commonly refers to something which is experienced, an 'intended' ethos as well as an 'experienced' ethos can be pointed to in the case of an ethos which is deliberately shaped or stipulated.

In relation to classrooms and schools, a number of aspects of 'ethos' can be usefully identified for specific attention. An important general preliminary point is that in the context of classrooms and schools, an ethos comes up for assessment in terms of the extent to which it embodies and facilitates educative influence. The potential tension between an 'intended' (or 'aspirational') ethos and an 'experienced' ethos is therefore an inescapable part of ethos in an educational context.

A number of related features of an ethos in relation to classrooms and schools are worthy of attention:

(i) An ethos in both the 'intended' and 'experienced' sense is value-laden. Whilst it makes sense to speak of a 'toxic' *culture* (see, for example, Solvason, 2005, pp. 90–91) the notion of a 'toxic' *ethos* sounds odd. In the context of education, the values of an ethos are derived from the evaluative weight of education itself (see (ii) below). The evaluative ladenness of ethos in general is discernible in the Greek roots of the notion in 'character' and 'ethics'. For Aristotle, ethos was one of three main rhetorical styles, the others being logos and pathos. In ethos, an appeal is made to the audience from the character of the speaker revealed in certain specific qualities of character, such as good sense, good moral character and good will. An Aristotelian perspective on the evaluative basis of ethos in its application to classrooms and schools would similarly intimate the need for an ethos in these contexts to embody certain specific values. In present use, however, the term ethos tends to retain a general but unspecific evaluative force. This is not, however, a clear cut matter, and forms of *de facto* influence which are negatively evaluated are sometimes referred to in terms of (a prevailing) ethos.

(ii) An ethos in both the 'intended' or 'aspirational' sense, and in the 'experienced' sense must, if it is to be explicitly justified educationally, relate the elements of the ethos to an articulated and defensible set of educational aims and values and to an overall vision of education. Recent work by John White and others has sought to align the various subjects of the national curriculum with the aims and values now stated for the curriculum as a whole (White, 2004). A similar process of alignment with educational aims and values needs

to take place in relation to both the 'intended' and the 'experienced' senses of the ethos of classrooms and schools. A central matter for consideration here is the extent to which given ethos elements are genuinely expressive of defensible educational aims and values. There is no suggestion, here, of course, that this process can be conducted in a merely theoretical manner, much less that philosophical theorising can be applied to educational practice in a straightforward way (on the role of philosophy in relation to educational policy and practice see McLaughlin, 2000).

(iii) An ethos in both the 'intended' and the 'experienced' sense must aspire to forms of coherence and congruence. Forms of inconsistency, conflict, fragmentation and disharmony within an ethos, in either sense of the term, can undermine it. This is not to claim, however, that forms of conflict and disharmony cannot be embodied within an ethos. An ethos, for example, can embody a coherent approach to the resolution of actual or potential conflict and disharmony. Conflict can, however, emerge between different 'experienced' ethoses in the same context (see (iv) below) and between 'intended' and 'experienced' ethos. Donnelly, for example, holds that processes relating to ethos are characterised by inherent contradictions and inconsistencies (2000, p. 150), such as those relating to gaps between the religious aspirations contained in the formal statement of the ethos of a Catholic school on the one hand and the actual reactions of teachers and students to these aspirations on the other. For Donnelly, ethos in the 'experienced' sense is '... a *negotiated* process whereby individuals come to some agreement about what should and should not be prioritised' (*op. cit.*, p. 150). Donnelly usefully draws attention to three dimensions of ethos relating to the extent to which members of a school embrace an ethos in a superficial or a deep way: 'aspirational ethos', 'ethos of outward attachment' and 'ethos of inward attachment' (*op. cit.*, p. 151). An ethos of 'inward attachment' is most expressive of the coherence and congruence to which ethos aspires. (For unease about the notion of an 'imposed ethos' see Hogan 1984; Williams, 2000, pp. 81–82.)

(iv) An ethos in the 'experienced' sense must be potent and pervasive in the sense that it must exert a discernible influence within the 'atmosphere' and climate of classrooms and schools: it must have an 'impact' (on this see Dancy, 1979). In this matter, however, it is important to note there may be several ethoses competing for attention within a given school either at the level of the whole school or of sub-units within it, which are not all necessarily harmonious with

each other (on conflicts of these kinds see, for example, Solvason 2005, pp. 88–91). Tomlinson *et al.*, in their study *The School Effect* concluded that it was the sub-units of schools, such as departments and classrooms, which had the greatest significance on whether the distinctive needs of students from ethnic minority backgrounds were being met: the school as a whole was less significant (Tomlinson *et al.*, 1989). An ethos in the ‘experienced’ sense aspires to pervasive influence, but this may not be straightforwardly achieved for the school as a whole.

(v) An ethos in the ‘experienced’ sense has a given, established or enduring feel to it in that it aspires to become ‘taken for granted’. Aristotle in his *Ethics* (Aristotle, 1976, Bk 1.2) points out that what constitutes an ethos arises spontaneously from natural habits; from what has become second nature in one’s dealings with one’s associates (quoted in Hogan, 1984, p. 700). The force of this point is contained in Allder’s observation that an ‘ethos’ is concerned with norms and not exceptions: isolated examples of rudeness and unkindness do not undermine an overall ethos of warm relationships within a school (Allder, 1993, p. 66). This is not, of course, to deny that a school ethos is constructed and reconstructed (even in radical ways). However, reconstructive efforts, if they are not to aim at the construction of a radically new replacement ethos, must be conducted in a way which is sensitive to the imperatives of givenness (on the difficulties of developing and changing a distinct ethos see, for example, Solvason, 2005, pp. 91–92). Haydon points out that while an ‘ethical environment’ may and should change, it should not be too fragile and needs to be sustained (Haydon, forthcoming, ch. 4).

(vi) It is characteristic of an ethos in the ‘experienced’ sense that it exerts (much of) its influence in an indirect and sometimes non-transparent and even unconscious way. This point is expressed rather roughly by Allder in her claim that an ethos is recognised in an experiential rather than a cognitive level (1993, p. 69). This general point can be accepted without subscribing to any overly simple distinction between the ‘experiential’ and the ‘cognitive’. An ethos tends to ‘speak for itself’ and does not require constant and extensive articulation. There are clear resonances between the notion of an ‘ethos’ and Bourdieu’s notion of a ‘habitus’: the deep-structured cultural dispositions within a community or an institution, which are part of primary socialisation and habit formation, perhaps in an unconscious way (Grace, 2002, p. 37). This is not to deny, however, that some ethoses embody an invitation to articulation as in, for

example, an ethos related to a form of moral education which places a great emphasis on the clarification of matters of principle.

Having drawn attention to some features of the concept of ethos in the context of classrooms and schools, I now turn to the educative influence of ethos and the difficulties and challenges to which it gives rise.

3. THE EDUCATIVE INFLUENCE OF ETHOS: SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Many of the concerns of teachers and educational leaders about the ethos of classrooms and schools, in both the 'intended' and 'experienced' sense of ethos, focus upon what can be roughly described as the 'content' of an ethos. A common example of concern here relates to the potentially undue salience in ethos of values, imperatives and processes drawn from business and the market (on this matter see, for example, Pring 2000). Processes of 'audit' and review with respect to the ethos of classrooms and schools are naturally concerned with particular matters relating to ethos which are apt for assessment, alteration, improvement or innovation. The leading questions in concerns of these kinds are of the form: What kind of 'intended' ethos do we want to have in our classrooms and schools, what is the nature of our existing 'experienced' ethos and in what respects does it match up to, or fail to match up to, our intentions? Posing and answering questions of these kinds is clearly vital, and apparently straightforward. However, such questions presuppose that the nature and importance of the educative influence exerted by an ethos is already clear. This more fundamental question should not be ignored, not least because attention to it can reap benefits in terms of the posing and answering of questions of a more directly practical kind.

Fundamental questions relating to the nature and importance of various forms of educational influence, and to the kinds of achievements with which education is concerned, are not the sole concern of philosophers. Many other forms of critical reflection (of, say, a sociological, psychological and anthropological kind) are highly relevant to such questions, as is the practical reflection and judgement of teachers and educational leaders themselves. The role of philosophy in relation to these questions is a contributory and collaborative one (see McLaughlin, 2000). Philosophy nevertheless has an important part to play in the achievement by teachers, educational leaders (and others) of appropriate forms of critical perspective and judgement with respect to their work, including forms of critical alertness with respect to forms of educational influence and

educational achievement. The significance of philosophy in these matters can be briefly illustrated.

The kinds of educational influence which teachers and schools seek to exert upon students relate to many kinds of achievements (in the broad sense of the term) and take a wide range of forms. The kinds of achievement on the part of students which are aimed at include knowledge and understanding of various kinds and levels, dispositions, virtues, qualities of character, emotional responses, tendencies, skills, capacities and so forth. The forms of educational influence through which this range of achievements are aimed at by teachers and schools are similarly varied, including instruction, explanation, questioning, discussing, demonstrating and exemplifying. Two of the major concerns of philosophy with respect to these kinds of achievements and forms of influence is to draw attention to (a) the value laden nature of the achievements and forms of influence, and need for justification of their pursuit by teachers and schools and (b) the need for a proper understanding of the character of the achievements and modes of influence and the logical and other kinds of relationship between them, as well as the need to avoid ill conceived and possibly unjustifiable aims and practices at the level of the classroom and school based on conceptual confusions and potential misunderstandings.

With regard to (a), the inherently value-laden nature of educational achievements and forms of influence can be illustrated by reflection upon the notion of 'development' in an educational context. Development can be distinguished from mere *change*. To change is not necessarily to develop. For Hamlyn, what is essential to the notion of development is '... the interrelationship between pre-existing conditions, necessary sequence and end-states within a pattern which we see as natural to a given kind of thing ...' (Hamlyn, 1983, p. 156). The change from an acorn into an oak tree can be regarded as a 'development' because it is characterised by these interrelated elements. Some aspects of change undergone by human beings correspond to this pattern. Certain physical changes (such as the acquisition of height and strength) lead us to speak of the 'physical development' of human beings in a relatively unproblematic way. As in the case of the acorns, the developmental character of the changes can be attributed in virtue of the presence of the interrelated elements of the sort specified by Hamlyn and assessed on largely empirical grounds. Other aspects of human 'development' are, of course, much more problematic because the changes in question are brought about by *learning*. Changes brought about by learning problematise each of the elements specified so far as characteristic of 'development':

pre-existing conditions, necessary sequence, end-states and an overall pattern which is 'natural' to a kind of thing. All learning presupposes pre-existing conditions, but these are not necessarily seen in terms of 'potential' embodying a 'teleological blueprint' for an end-state realisable through propitious 'unfolding'. Nor can learning be seen unproblematically as involving or requiring a transition through a 'necessary sequence' of engagement, understanding and achievement, as controversies about developmental learning theories of the sort developed by Piaget amply demonstrate. Crucially, much learning cannot be seen as aimed at, or terminated in, a pre-specifiable and determinate end-point. Learning is potentially open-ended. Nor is it possible to specify with any great degree of confidence what is 'natural' to 'the kind of thing' a human being is (on complexities in the notion of 'human nature' see, for example, Parekh, 2000, ch. 4). The attribution and assessment of 'development' in the case of human learning is therefore implicated in *normative* and not merely empirical considerations. Normative judgements in the attribution and assessment of human development are involved in such matters as the 'potential' which human beings are taken to have, the processes of learning which are seen as appropriate, the aims and direction of the learning (not an 'end-state' in any very precise sense) and in judgments about the kinds of 'things' that human beings are taken to be. The *value* of the kinds of learning in which human beings might engage (both *what* is being learnt and *how* it is being learnt) therefore enters into the picture. Education involves the wide ranging shaping of persons in many ways and invites and requires attention to the justificatory issues involved in the development by teachers and schools of persons *of a certain sort* (on this see, for example, Pring, 1984, ch. 2).

With regard to (b), philosophers have long been active in trying to ease conceptual confusions and potential misunderstandings relating to the character of a wide range of educational achievements and modes of influence, including 'skills', 'competences', 'multiple intelligences', 'emotional literacy and emotional intelligence', 'self-esteem', 'active learning', 'negotiated learning', 'learning styles', and the like. In each case philosophers have drawn attention to conceptual confusions and potential misunderstandings about the achievements and modes of influence in question which have significant implications for defensible aims and practices at the level of the classroom and school. In some cases, philosophers have suggested that certain conceptualisations of achievements and modes of influence are incoherent and potentially damaging in terms of educational practice.

It is important to note that the philosophical concern with (a) and (b) should not be read as implying that the life and work of a classroom or school should or could be seen as wholly and solely based on theoretical considerations, let alone philosophical ones. The evaluative questions involved in (a), for example, can never be completely clarified and brought to bear on practice in a straightforward way, and in relation to (b) it is not only the case that there is no necessary connection between good theory and good practice (which is widely acknowledged) but also that there is no necessary connection between bad theory and bad practice: good practice can flourish despite bad theory.

How can the considerations relating to (a) and (b) be brought to bear on the specific question of ethos in the context of classrooms and schools? I will consider this matter in reverse order, beginning with (b).

4. ETHOS IN CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS: EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND MODES OF INFLUENCE

Several features of an ethos noted in section 2, for example, (v) its established and 'taken for granted' character and (vi) the non-transparent way in which it exerts its influence harmonises with certain concerns and emphases of Aristotle. As noted earlier, both the kinds of educational achievements apt for attention by an ethos and the modes of influence which an ethos exerts are consistent with broadly Aristotelian accounts of these matters. In these accounts the forms of educational achievement seen as particularly apt for development via an ethos are qualities of character and virtue, dispositions, sensitivities of perception and qualities of judgement, most notably practical wisdom or *phronesis*. The nature of the judgement involved in *phronesis* requires practical knowledge of the good, together with intelligent and personally engaged sensitivity to situations and individuals, including oneself, in making judgements about what constitutes an appropriate expression of the good in a given circumstance. Practical judgment of this kind is inherently supple, non-formulable and non-codifiable, although the extent to which principles of some kind are involved has been the subject of much debate. Aristotle's invocation of the 'mean' as illuminative of what should properly guide judgement is well known:

Virtue is a character state concerned with choice, lying in the mean relative to us, being determined by reason and the way the person of practical wisdom would determine it. (Aristotle, 1976, 1107a1)

The particular kind of educative influence exerted by an ethos can best be seen in terms of the provision of a context in which a range of forms of educative influence and learning emphasised as significant by Aristotle can flourish, including imitation, habituation, training in feeling, attention and perception, induction into patterns of action and habit, forms of guidance and experience, and exemplification. For Aristotle, human development requires initiation into a culture in which qualities of personhood and character are recognised and practised. It is important to note that all these processes cannot be reduced to mere socialisation (on this matter see, for example, Carr, 1991, ch. 5).

Space precludes a fuller discussion at this point of these neglected forms of achievement and influence, both in their specifically Aristotelian form and more generally (on these matters see, for example, Carr, 1991; Carr and Steutel, 1999; Curren, 2000; Haydon, forthcoming; Lovibond, 2002; Lovlie, 1997; McLaughlin and Halstead, 1999).

Much greater reflection is needed on the kinds of educational achievement with which ethos is concerned, the specific aspects of the educational aims and values of the classroom and school with which it is particularly related and the modes via which its influence is exerted. Such reflection should lead to the realisation of the educational importance of ethos and its scope. The truth that the educative influence exerted by 'ethos' *cannot be confined to* the formally taught curriculum should not blind us to the role which 'ethos' does play across all aspects of the life and work of schools, including the formally taught curriculum. Three interesting aspects of educational influence exerted by ethos are worthy of brief emphasis here, each of which illuminates aspects of its educative importance.

First, ethos frequently exerts educative influence in relation to matters which cannot be explicitly articulated. For example, in his essay 'Learning and Teaching' Michael Oakeshott points to the complex and living inheritance which teachers pass on to their pupils, the nature of which requires not merely the acquisition by students of information (which can be communicated by instruction) but also of judgement, involving the acquisition of the intellectual virtues and of 'style' (which can only be imparted unobtrusively in ways which are highly related to an ethos: tones of voice, gestures, asides, oblique utterances and by example) (Oakeshott, 1990). Second, and relatedly, an ethos gives rise to neglected questions about the broad range of kinds of example which we expect teachers to give in classrooms and schools (on these matters and the complexities which arise in relation to expectations concerning teacher example

see McLaughlin, 2004, cf. Hansen, 1997). Third, an ethos is frequently a necessary counterpart to more explicit and systematic forms of teaching and learning. Kohlberg's acknowledgement of the necessity of a 'Just Community' within which to situate his programmes of moral education are an illustration of this point (see Reed, 1997, esp. chs 7, 8).⁴ It should be noted, however, that an ethos is not a substitute for more systematic and explicit teaching and learning (on the need for such teaching and learning in personal, social and health education and in citizenship education in addition to attention to considerations which can be described broadly in terms of ethos see Office for Standards in Education, 2005a, 2005b).

Appropriate forms of reflection about the nature of the kinds of educational achievement with which ethos is concerned, the specific aspects of the educational aims and values of the classroom and school to which it is particularly related and the modes via which that influence is exerted should enable attention to be focused more precisely on a range of neglected matters of considerable educational significance.

5. ETHOS IN CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS: VALUES

Several features of an ethos noted in section 2, most notably (i) the general value-laden nature of an ethos and (ii) the need for an ethos to be justified with reference to an articulated and defensible set of educational aims and values, together with the discussion in (a) in section 3 of the fuller implications of the normative character of educative influence in general brings into clear focus the difficult question of clarifying and justifying the ethos of a given classroom and school in evaluative terms. Attention to evaluative influence in relation to ethos will enable *inter alia* matters of incoherence, incongruity and conflict in relation to ethos (see (iii) and (iv) in section 2) to be addressed. However, the difficulty and potentially controversial nature of evaluative judgment in relation to ethos is brought into focus when it is remembered that what is at stake is the formation of persons in a wide ranging way. While Aristotle's analysis of the achievements and modes of influence involved in ethos may be found convincing, his own detailed account of the virtues which it should promote is unlikely to compel contemporary acceptance.

The task for teachers and educational leaders in getting to grips with the evaluative aspects of an ethos is complicated not only by the inherent complexities involved in getting to grips with an ethos

itself, in both its 'intended' and 'experienced' senses, but also in complexities involved in getting to grips with educational values in a coherent and practical way at classroom and school level (on this matter, see, for example, McLaughlin, 1994).

One prominent difficulty which arises for the notion of an ethos from an evaluative point of view is that much recent educational debate has focused upon the need for schools to exert complex forms of evaluative influence on their students if that influence is to be justifiable in the face of the demands of legitimate plurality. In the common school, for example, I have argued that the school has a responsibility not to promote a secular view of life as a whole or an attitude of relativism towards differences, but to engage with matters of moral texture and complexity (McLaughlin, 2003a). However, this general perspective leaves the common school with dilemmas about the kind of ethos it is going to promote in relation to this educative task, given that an ethos must be in some sense substantive (and may not therefore be apt for the exercise of the subtle and nuanced educative influence which the demands of moral texture and complexity requires) and that it exerts its influence in an indirect and sometimes non-transparent and even unconscious way (see (v) and (vi) in section 2 above). Kenneth Strike addresses this problem in terms of raising critical questions about the kinds of school community which a common school can legitimately promote (Strike, 2000; cf. Gereluk, 2005). Although it might be considered that a faith school may have fewer problems in this regard, such schools need to face parallel, if different, complexities in the educational influence which they can exert (on this see McLaughlin, 1999). Concerns of these general kinds gives rise to critical questions about the forms of character education in which schools of various kinds can legitimately engage (on this matter see, for example, Arthur, 2003; McLaughlin and Halstead, 1999; cf. DfEE, 2001, 4.76–4.79).

A further difficulty is that, even if educational values can be brought into adequate critical focus, the derivation of implications for ethos (or for other aspects of the life and work of the classroom and school) is not unproblematic: other mediating considerations come into play (see, however, Fielding, 1988).

A major conclusion which emerges from this part of the discussion is that consideration of the evaluative dimension of ethos at classroom and school level needs to be much broader and deeper than the rather superficial examination of necessarily schematic and abbreviated 'ethos statements' which prevail in many professional contexts today.

6. CONCLUSION

The educational importance of ethos in the context of classrooms and schools is manifest. Much fuller critical attention is needed to the meaning of ethos in these contexts, to the kinds of educative achievement and influence which are characteristically associated with ethos, to the specific aspects of the educational aims and values of the classroom and school with which ethos is particularly related and to the exploration and justification of the evaluative aspects of ethos. The present discussion has offered a preliminary consideration of these questions. Appropriate and sustained engagement with these questions at the level of the classroom and school by teachers and educational leaders should combat a tendency to deal with matters of ethos in an unduly superficial way. Any such engagement with such issues on the part of teachers and educational leaders must not merely be a form of theorising, but part of a process of the improvement of practice via forms of pedagogic wisdom, itself requiring a form of ethos for the practice of teaching and educational leadership which repays careful attention.⁵

7. NOTES

- ¹ Allder's use of the terms 'frontier' and 'connecting' words is drawn from the work of the philosopher of religion Paul van Buren. For complexities in the relationship between 'frontier' and 'connecting' words see Allder, 1993, pp. 62–63.
- ² Graham Haydon is surely right to point out, for example, that no school ethos could be wholly separate from the school system of which it is part (Haydon, forthcoming).
- ³ I owe this example to Jeremy Hayward.
- ⁴ Reed argues that Kohlberg's work on the construction and practice of democratic community ('the just community') is in fact the most important and enduring element in Kohlberg's theory of moral development as a whole (see 1997, esp. chs 7, 8).
- ⁵ On this notion of 'communities of practice' in relation to this matter see, for example, McLaughlin, 2003b.

8. REFERENCES

- ALLDER, M. (1993) The meaning of 'school ethos', *Westminster Studies in Education*, 16, 59–69.
- ARTHUR, J. (2003) *Education with Character. The Moral Economy of Schooling* (London, RoutledgeFalmer).
- ARISTOTLE (1976) *The Ethics of Aristotle. The Nicomachean Ethics* (revised edition) (London, Penguin Books).
- BRONFENBRENNER, U. (1974) *Two Worlds of Childhood. US and USSR* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Education).

- CANAVAN, N. and MONAHAN, L. (2000) *School Culture and Ethos. Releasing the Potential. A resource pack to enable schools to access, articulate and apply ethos values* (Dublin, Marino Institute of Education).
- CARR, D. (1991) *Educating the Virtues. An Essay on the Philosophical Psychology of Moral Development and Education* (London, Routledge).
- CARR D. and STEUTEL J. (Eds) (1999) *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education* (London, Routledge).
- CATHOLIC EDUCATION SERVICE (1999) *Evaluating the Distinctive Nature of a Catholic School* Revised Edition www.cesew.org.uk accessed 4 June 2005.
- CURREN, R.R. (2000) *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield).
- DANCY, J. (1979) The concept of the ethos of a school, *Perspectives 1* (University of Exeter).
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (2001) *Schools Building on Success* Cm 5050 (London, The Stationery Office).
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS (2001) *Schools Achieving Success* (London, The Stationery Office).
- DONNELLY, C. (2000) In pursuit of school ethos, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 48 (2), 134–154.
- EISNER, E. (1994) *Ethos and Education Perspectives. A Series of Papers on Values and Education* (Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum) www.ltsotland.org.uk accessed 4 June 2005.
- FIELDING, M. (1988) Democracy and fraternity: towards a new paradigm for the comprehensive school. In H. LAUDER and S. BROWN (Eds) *Education in Search of a Future* (London, Routledge).
- FURLONG, C. and MONAHAN, L. (Eds) (2000) *School Culture and Ethos. Cracking the Code* (Dublin, Marino Institute of Education).
- GERELUK, D. (2005) Communities in a changing educational environment, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53 (1), 4–18.
- GLOVER, D. and COLEMAN, M. (2005) School culture, climate and ethos: interchangeable or distinctive concepts? *Journal of In-Service Education* 31 (2), 251–271.
- GRACE, G. (2002) *Catholic Schools. Mission, Markets and Morality* (London, RoutledgeFalmer).
- HAMLIN, D. (1983) The concept of development. In D. HAMLIN *Perception, Learning and the Self. Essays in the Philosophy of Psychology* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- HANSEN, D.T. (1997) Being a good influence. In N.C. BURBULES and D.T. HANSEN (Eds) *Teaching and its Predicaments* (Boulder, WestviewPress).
- HAYDON, G. (forthcoming) *Education, Philosophy and the Ethical Environment* (London, RoutledgeFalmer).
- HOGAN, P. (1984) The question of ethos in schools, *The Furrow*, 35 (11), 693–704.
- LOVIBOND, S. (2002) *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press).
- LOVLIE, L. (1997) The Use of Example in Moral Education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 31 (1), 409–425.
- MCLAUGHLIN, T.H. (1994) Values, Coherence and the School, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 24 (3), 453–450.
- MCLAUGHLIN, T.H. (1999) Distinctiveness and the Catholic School. Balanced Judgement and the Temptations of Commonality. In J.C. CONROY (Ed.) *Catholic Education. Inside-Out, Outside-In* (Dublin, Veritas).
- MCLAUGHLIN, T.H. (2000) Philosophy and Educational Policy: possibilities, tensions and tasks, *Journal of Educational Policy*, 15 (4), 441–457.

- McLAUGHLIN, T.H. (2003a) The burdens and dilemmas of common schooling. In K. McDONOUGH and W. FEINBERG (Eds) *Citizenship Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies. Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities* (Oxford, University Press).
- McLAUGHLIN, T.H. (2003b) Teaching as a practice and a community of practice. The limits of commonality and the demands of diversity, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37 (2), 339–352.
- McLAUGHLIN, T.H. (2004) Philosophy, values and schooling: principles and predicaments of teacher example. In W. AIKEN and J. HALDANE (Eds) *Philosophy and its Public Role. Essays in Ethics, Politics, Society and Culture* (Charlottesville, VA and Exeter, Imprint Academic), 69–83.
- McLAUGHLIN, T.H. and HALSTEAD, J.M. (1999) Education in character and virtue In J.M. HALSTEAD and T.H. McLAUGHLIN (Eds) *Education in Morality* (London, Routledge).
- MORTIMORE, P., SAMMONS, P., STOLL, L., LEWIS, D. and ECOB, R. (1988) *School Matters. The Junior Years* (Wells, Open Books).
- OAKESHOTT, M. (1990) Learning and teaching. In T. FULLER (Ed.) *The Voice of Liberal Learning. Michael Oakshott on Education* (New Haven, Yale University Press).
- OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (2005a) *Personal, Social and Health Education in Secondary Schools*, HMI 2311 www.ofsted.gov.uk accessed 4 June 2005.
- OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (2005b) *Citizenship in Secondary Schools: evidence from OFSTED Inspections*, HMI 2335 www.ofsted.gov.uk accessed 4 June 2005.
- PAREKH, B. (2000) *Rethinking Multiculturalism. Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London, Macmillan).
- PRING, R. (1984) *Personal and Social Education in the Curriculum. Concepts and Content* (London, Hodder and Stoughton).
- PRING, R. (2000) School culture and ethos: towards an understanding. In FURLONG, C. and MONAHAN, L. (Eds) (2000) *School Culture and Ethos. Cracking the Code* (Dublin, Marino Institute of Education).
- QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (2000a) *Citizenship at Key Stages 3 and 4. Initial Guidance for Schools* (London, QCA).
- QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (2000b) *Personal, Social and Health Education at Key Stages 3 and 4. Initial Guidance for Schools* (London, QCA).
- REED, D.R.C. (1997) *Following Kohlberg. Liberalism and the Practice of Democratic Community* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press).
- RUTTER, M., MAUGHAN, B., MORTIMORE, P., OUSTON, J. and SMITH, A. (1979) *Fifteen Thousand Hours. Secondary Schools and their Effects on Children* (London, Open Books).
- RYLE, G. (1949) *The Concept of Mind* (London, Hutchinson).
- SCOTTISH OFFICE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AND HM INSPECTORS OF SCHOOLS (1992a) *Using Ethos Indicators in Primary School Self-Evaluation. Taking Account of the Views of Pupils, Parents and Teachers. School Development Planning Support Materials* (Scottish Office Education Department).
- SCOTTISH OFFICE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AND HM INSPECTORS OF SCHOOLS (1992b) *Using Ethos Indicators in Secondary School Self-Evaluation. Taking Account of the Views of Pupils, Parents and Teachers. School Development Planning Support Materials* (Scottish Office Education Department).
- SOLVASON, C. (2005) Investigating specialist school ethos ... or do you mean culture? *Educational Studies*, 31 (1), 85–94.

- STRIKE, K. (2000) Schools as communities: four metaphors, three models and a dilemma or two, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 34 (4), 617–642.
- TOMLINSON, S., HOGARTH, T. and THOMAS, H. (1989) *The School Effect. A Study of Multi-Racial Comprehensives* (London, Policy Studies Institute).
- WILLIAMS, K. (2000) Understanding ethos – a philosophical and literary exploration in FURLONG, C. and MONAHAN, L. (Eds) (2000) *School Culture and Ethos. Cracking the Code* (Dublin, Marino Institute of Education).
- WHITE, J. (Ed.) (2004) *Re-thinking the School Curriculum. Values, Aims and Purposes* (London, Routledge Falmer).

Correspondence

Professor Terence McLaughlin
School of Educational Foundations and Policy Studies
Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
Email: t.mclaughlin@ioe.ac.uk

Copyright of British Journal of Educational Studies is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.