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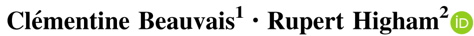
A Reappraisal of Children's 'Potential'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Abstract What does it mean for a child to fulfil his or her potential? This article explores the contexts and implications of the much-used concept of potential in educational discourses. We claim that many of the popular, political and educational uses of the term in relation to childhood have a problematic blind spot: interpersonality, and the necessary coexistence for the concept to be receivable of all children's 'potentials'. Rather than advocating abandoning the term—a futile gesture given its emotive force—we argue that the concept of children's potential must be profoundly rethought to be workable as a philosophical notion in education. In an era marked by the unspoken assumption that 'unlimited potential' is always a good thing, we argue that it might be necessary to think about the limitations of the notion of individual potential; namely, the moment when it comes into contact with other people's projects. We propose a conceptualisation of potential as the negotiated, situated, ever-changing creation of a group of individuals, in a process marked by conflict, and which remains essentially difficult.

Keywords Potential · Agency · Existentialism · Intersubjectivity

Introduction

> We want to ensure all young people have the tools and opportunities they need to fulfil their potential, regardless of background or life circumstances. (DfE 2013)

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> Helping children reach their full potential is an integral part of World Bank activities. (Wolfensohn 1997, vi)

What does it mean to 'fulfil one's potential'? The expression is so common that it does not seem to require an explanation; yet what exactly it points to is less than clear. To talk of potential is to offer the promise of *something* which a person *should* (be able to) do, given the right stimuli or circumstances. But of course this future state of affairs, dimly detected in the present individual, is to a degree tautological: 'by definition, each individual of course has "potential"', notes Ruth Jonathan (1988, 116). And if 'more time to come' can be equated with 'more potential', then children are superior in this respect to adults; thus we should not be surprised that the term potential is so often associated to children. This simple view of potential actions associated to 'more time to come' is not, however, what most people mean when they talk of potential: in educational discourse, 'to have potential' is a more powerful cliché. It can be used by teachers to soften the blow of a mediocre end-of-term report ('He has a lot of potential'), or by parents to encourage budding talent: 'You have the potential to be a professional violinist—don't waste it.' More importantly, it is routinely exploited by politicians or policy-makers to strengthen their justifications of educational reforms or budget allocation—dressing them up, as illustrated by the remarkably vague epigraphs above, with dreams of a brighter future.

How should we tackle, as philosophers of education, the repeated allusions to the identification, fulfilment or waste of children's 'potential'? Simply making the academic request to do away with the notion would not be enough. Firstly, it may not be followed; the use of the term 'potential' in popular, political, philosophical and educational discourse shows a deep connection to our conceptions of childhood and education—one which it would be not just wishful, but more importantly dishonest, to try to uproot. Secondly, abandoning the notion of potential altogether would impoverish a debate which needs to take place: our definitions of potential are connected to what we want and expect from an educational system, and to what type of society we aspire to.

So the concept is in need of theorisation, and this is what the two authors of this article are hoping to work towards. Between us we straddle several academic fields—the cultural sociology of childhood, philosophy of education and student leadership—and we seek here to merge these perspectives to critique current uses of 'potential' in educational discourse, to re-theorise potential, and to link it to empirical examples. We will be looking first at a number of implicit definitions of potential that dominate popular and political uses of the term. Those definitions have in common, as we shall discuss, a problematic emphasis on the individual, an idealistic dimension, and a utilitarian purposefulness. They also pose irresolvable ethical problems when the question of intersubjectivity arises; they do not—perhaps because they cannot—consider the possibility that 'realising one's potential' may lead to insuperable difficulties in a context where everyone is attempting to do the same thing. We argue, therefore, that the concept of children's potential must be profoundly rethought to accommodate the fact that any child's potential cannot be envisaged without its conflictual ties to all other children's potentials, as well as to wider societal aims.

In an era marked by the unspoken assumption that unlimited potential is always a good thing, we argue that it is necessary to *curb* the notion of individual potential, making it responsive to the others which it will always encounter. This limitation, we argue, is productive and ethical. It presents potential as the negotiated and ever-changing creation of individuals, who at all times are confronted to the temptation to dissolve or subjugate other agencies in the process of fulfilling their potential. This theorisation, and an example of its being put to the test in a real-life situation, will be developed in the last part of this paper.

Uses of 'Potential' in Educational Discourse

The word 'potential', which derives from the Latin word for 'power', is normally used to allude to what one *could* do when moved to act in future situations, rather than on what one is actually doing now. But this distinction is misleading: through the word 'potential', future accomplishment is transformed into a *present* and *actual* personal property—as with the term 'potential energy' in physics, where energy *must* be released if the right conditions are fulfilled. From a biological perspective, 'potential' chimes with the Aristotelian notion of tendency: just as the acorn has 'within it' the future oak, the young child has within him or her the potential to become an adult. However, the physical and biological uses of the word do not fully encapsulate its implications for humans, which are complicated by such fundamental qualities as intentionality, consciousness and values. Potential is more than tendency, because the use of the word almost always implies an ideal of sorts: a brighter future somehow already contained within a person or group.

The interest in human potential goes back at least as far back as the Renaissance, where in art, philosophy and Christian theology, increasing emphasis was placed on mankind being made in the image of God—and thus both worthy of reverence and capable of the highest achievements. Michelangelo's iconic representation of God and Adam in the Sistine Chapel portrays Man as lower in rank but equal in stature; their near-touch of fingers suggests a transfer of divine power. This was a reflection of humankind's growing power, through reason and science, to transform the world in its image. But the concept of potential for humankind itself truly gained momentum with the advent of the human sciences; in particular, psychology. Galvanised by late nineteenth-century scientific research on intelligence, the twentieth century witnessed a surge in attempts to observe, define, measure and improve 'human potential' in various domains; in particular, through the centurial search for means of assessing and improving 'intelligence', notably in children (see the repeated uses of the term in, for instance, the works of early twentieth-century psychologists Lewis Terman (1919) or Leta Hollingworth (1942)). The concept of potential began to be increasingly thought of as a property of children—either individual children, or indeed childhood itself; and, by extension, education became the enterprise through which potential might be 'realised' or 'fulfilled'.

We map below some of what we see as the most prominent philosophical uses of potential in education, in relation to, firstly, gifted individuals; secondly, to childhood in general; and finally to the educational 'mission' of 'realising' the potential of both individuals and childhood itself. As we hope to show, these uses of potential—commonly elided in educational discourse—present a constant conflict between the interest of individuals (the notion that 'fulfilling one's potential' is part of self-actualisation) and the service to society that this 'fulfilment' should operate. As such, potential is a utilitarian notion. It is also a wishful one—not only because it hints optimistically at the promise of a 'better' future, but also because it silences the conflicts that might follow precisely from the attempts to fulfil one's potential, in a context where everyone is attempting to do the same thing.

'High-Potential Children': Soteriological Uses of Potential

At the turn of the twentieth century, as Rawlins (2006) argues, children who were precociously exhibiting mastery of specific skills stopped being considered pathological and began to be seen as 'fuller' of a vague and mystical quality: potential. The rise of a

scientific vocabulary of 'giftedness' and 'ability' accompanied educational efforts to understand how one may mine the untapped 'potential' of uniquely able children, and an energetic strand of child psychology specialising in the study of gifted children developed, led by researchers such as, most famously, Lewis Terman and Leta Hollingworth. 'Potential', implicitly understood here as '*high* potential', became an implicit property of those children who were particularly able or precocious in some established domains. High IQ was understood to be a reliable measure of this potential, but Terman, Hollingworth and others forcefully argued that high-IQ children required educational assistance to fulfil their potentials. Longitudinal studies of such children were thus undertaken to ascertain whether or not 'the promise of youth' was realised in adulthood (see in particular Burks et al. 1930), and how best to ensure that realisation.

Potential here could be understood as merging with the notion of individual capacity: children were seen as differently fixed-sized containers of future power. But while this vision might be seen as flattering to the children identified as having 'more potential' than others, it also objectified and instrumentalised those children by presenting them to the rest of humanity as saviours and heroes in the service of society. 'We know', said Hollingworth (1942, 289), that gifted children'—they and no others—will possess as adults those mental powers on which the learned professions depend for conservation and advancement'; 'Only a few in the top one per cent can contribute to actual *progress*' (id., 290). This vision of potential could be called *soteriological*: in the writings of the time, the gifted child's potential was to solve humanity's problems and take it to a higher level.

This soteriological reading of giftedness as 'potential for humanity' never disappeared; as we argue, it is one of the central components of contemporary understandings of potential in education. David Henry Feldman's book on child prodigies, evocatively titled *Child Prodigies and the Development of Human Potential* (1986), makes the grand claim: 'I believe that the prodigy stands both as exemplar and beacon, demonstrating the power of optimal early expression of potential and pointing to the fact that, through judicious use of that potential, humanity is capable of influencing its own future development' (1986, 4). We see here how the potential of *some* children becomes rhetorically and philosophically mingled with the potential of *all* humanity. Today, gifted children, alternatively called 'high potential subjects', are still often portrayed in academic and political discourse as hidden resources for humanity, ready to improve it under the right stimuli, and education's role in finding and using these stimuli is foregrounded.

Yet the enterprise is difficult, since more progressive views of giftedness advocate that potential is not connected to actual achievement: 'Giftedness exists even when unrecognised by society and… even when the gift has not been actualized through achievements. …It may also be defined by high potential in the absence of unusual achievement' (von Karolyi and Winner 2005, 377). *How* may it be defined, then? Ruth Cigman urges educators to 'identify and respond to children's potentials appropriately, *particularly* when these are masked by social inequalities. A naturally bright child may be passed over as such because her performance is unexceptional' (2006, 200). This implies that educators can and should act as detectors of child potential, even in the absence of current 'performance'. Potential is defined here as a tangible, possibly innate ('natural', says Cigman) property of the individual child, but also as a rather secret and mysterious quality. The role of the adult educator to 'develop' or 'realise' this potential is portrayed as all the more crucial and urgent.

The belief that educationalists should be detecting and nurturing children's elusive individual potentials inscribes this soteriological view of potential quite firmly in the contemporary discourse of accountability and responsibility in education. Individual

children may have more potential than others, but it is the duty of the school to identify each child's potential and thus make each child *useful*. In gifted education specialist Joan Freeman's words, 'I am certain that in every country, there are children packed with potential who are never recognised in a formal educational setting' (2010, 6). The gifted child's 'potential', in short, is both the dream and the duty of contemporary education. We return to this 'responsibility' of education later.

The Potentials of Childhood: Between the Hopeful and the Utilitarian

Beyond gifted children, potential in the twentieth century became also more generally—and generously—attributed to *childhood* as an age category; the symbol of 'the child' as 'full of potential' forms for historian of childhood Sally Shuttleworth a central difference between Victorian and contemporary perceptions of children (2010). It became increasingly natural in the twentieth century to think of children as future adults, in part because of dwindling infant mortality, and of the relatively lower birth rate. Childhood became a byword for potential; for the promise of a brighter future through their actions to come. Sociologists and philosophers of education have long remarked upon the metaphorical language used by adults, in many contexts, to refer to childhood; contemporary conceptualisations of childhood are strikingly future-bound, portraying children as bearers of the future and full of promises. Children, in the words of Alison James and Alan Prout, 'are the "next generation," "the guardians of the future" on whose shoulders time itself sits' (1997, 239). This is not just in common discourse: much as some researchers may oppose it, Emma Uprichard notes (2008), children are talked about in the sociology and philosophy of education as future adults, and, in that respect, as worthy of investments. Symbolic childhood—the web of desires, fears, values and conceptions associated by a given society to childhood (Cook 2002)—is now an eminently future-bound conceptual network, characterised by hope and by intolerance of 'wasted potential'. Kimberley Reynolds and Paul Yates argue (against Philippe Ariès) that parents have always grieved the deaths of children; however, they say, we now grieve such thankfully rare events in a different fashion: 'since the child by definition has not lived long enough to achieved anticipated goals… to die young is associated with lack of fulfilment and even waste' (1998, 157). In other words, while some individual children may be seen by virtue of their precocious or extraordinary capacities as having 'more' potential than others, there is in discourses surrounding childhood another narrative, that of childhood itself as 'having potential'; potential is thus both the variable property of individuals, and the overarching quality of the construct of childhood in contemporary times.

This is a hopeful vision; however, the notions of 'fulfilment' and 'waste' mentioned above draw attention to the fact that it is also connected to social and economic purpose. The child's assumed longer future allows for a larger expense of time for any project to be realised than for an adult; the rising generation is thus seen as the raw material for the future prosperity of society. Ideologically, Prout and James remind us (1997), there is much about the perception of childhood as 'full of potential' which resonates with a capitalist understanding of time, education, and individuality. Educating children is here viewed as an investment, whose returns may be alluringly large; the degree to which it will fructify depending on the quality both of the primary material, and of the educational input. Childhood itself is thus conceptualised as a latent state holding the promise of future efficacy in its developed adult form. The corollary of this idea of future power is a lack of power in the present, often accompanied by another sentimental vision of children free from responsibility, carefree heirs-apparent of their future power (or powerlessness). This

vision of childhood as intrinsically imbued with potential is here framed by, and partly in conflict with, the expected economic benefits of childhood as 'investment' for the future. But for this investment to function, and for the potential of children—and childhood—to be 'realised', adults are more than ever required to focus their educational efforts and economic resources on that realisation.

Education and the Realisation of Potential: The Adult's and Society's Roles

Evocations of the potentials of childhood in general and of individual children in particular are almost always entangled with recommendations as to their best 'cultivation' by educators; and in return, educational policy makes frequent reference to children's and childhood's 'potential'. The use of the term is commonplace in political discourse on education in England. Here is a longer version of this article's epigraph:

> …we want to ensure all young people have the tools and opportunities they need to fulfil their potential, regardless of background or life circumstances. We believe that all young people should have access to local and national opportunities to develop skills for life and work and to create a more responsible, engaged and cohesive society. (DfE 2013)

This quotation mingles the various aspects of potential which we have described above. It plays, first, on the *individualistic* notion that every child should achieve self-actualisation through education, becoming who they want to be within the limits of their 'potential'. The quotation then highlights the *economic* benefits of the future times when potentials are actualised, with pointed reference to work and professional competencies; it is implied that both individual children and society will benefit from them. Finally, the quotation alludes hopefully—but rather vaguely—to a future where children, through fulfilling their potential, create a better society than their parents have been able to achieve. This elision of different perspectives on potential is commonplace; it suggests that these individualistic, economic and utopian strands to the concept are somehow easily reconcilable.

We argue, however, that clear tensions between these perspectives are visible within educational practice. English schools are expected to work towards the fulfilment of individual children's potential both as unique individuals, and as measured against age-linked performance in standardised assessments; furthermore, they are charged to do so both for the benefit of individuals and for that of society as a whole. The extent to which teachers and schools could achieve this daunting task is doubtful despite being subject to stringent measurement and assessment; yet the terms 'potential' and 'fulfilling potential' are an integral part of the rhetoric of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), with the responsibility and work of teachers constantly underlined:

> Every child, from the most disadvantaged to the most able, must have the environment and opportunities they need to learn and succeed. To raise attainment, schools need to create a disciplined learning environment, teach a broad and balanced curriculum and support the needs of individual children, helping them to realise their potential (Ofsted 2014, 13).

Tensions abound in this extract. Individual children's needs are to be supported and their individual potentials realised—but in the name of 'raising attainment' in standardised assessments. Is an individual's potential thus understood as anything other than improving grades? The 'most able' are contrasted not with the 'least able' but with the 'most disadvantaged'; this implies both that ability is innate and that social background matters,

without making their relationship explicit. Elsewhere the same report states that the potential of *neither* group is currently being realised. Is the school system thus expected to narrow the attainment gap between them—as an 'educable property' view of potential demands—or to maintain it—as an 'innate property' view demands?

That 'high-potential' or 'gifted and talented' schemes tend to be disproportionately peopled with middle-class children is well-known.[1] One could respond that this classed dimension of the notion of potential is forcefully counteracted by the efforts displayed by the educational system to 'identify' and 'harness' the potential of children from all social categories (see for instance the programme titled 'Potentially Gifted Minority Student Project' in Florida; Alamprese 1989). This is indeed what Cigman alludes to, quoted earlier, when she says that potential may be 'masked by social inequality'. However, sociological studies in education in recent years have demonstrated the extent to which the belief in children's potential is *in itself* central to the educational practices of the middle classes, which uphold:

> … a particular kind of individualism, and a particular kind of freedom, embedded in the specialness and particularity of the young child, and the idea that the child should be able to realize their inherent capabilities or potential (Vincent and Ball 2007, 1070).

That their children 'have potential' is an 'implicit assumption' for middle-class parents (Lucey and Reay 2002, 333), which drives their educational choices; this notion of potential thus becomes a justification for parental and class pressure. In other words, potential itself is a problematically classed and only superficially meritocratic concept. Everyone can theoretically 'have' high potential, but there are great disparities in the expectations held of children from different backgrounds, normalising potential for middle-class children, while high potential is seen as exceptional for their lower SES peers. Potential used in this sense is thus divisive, encouraging competition and differentiation between children, since the only way for schools to show that they are helping children to achieve their potentials that is recognised by Ofsted is to rank them against their peers and show that they outperform them. In such a system there will be winners and losers; by this definition, many or most will not reach their proverbial potential.

Problems of 'Potential' in Contemporary Educational Discourse

On the levels of policy and practice, then, there are real tensions both within and between different conceptions of children's potential: self-actualisation versus economic functionality; exceptionality versus human perfectibility; competitive self-promotion versus utopian collectivism. Rhetorically, however, they are easily mixed and elided into phrases which harmonise their distinctive notes, seeking to claim the moral authority of all. This ease stems, we suggest, from a shared philosophical *individualism* in which the student—their learning, rights, achievements and future position in society—is seen as the basic unit of the educational process; but also a shared *utilitarianism* whereby this individual self-actualisation is expected to lead to the betterment of society and to economic prosperity.

[1] Exact statistics on the matter are difficult to compile. From gifted education researchers, we may learn that students whose parents are in the top income quartile are five times more likely to be present in gifted programmes than students from the bottom quartile (Borland 2005, 11). More interesting for our purposes are the recurrent claims in the sociology of education that middle-class parents are particularly adept at getting their children accepted onto gifted programmes, and that gifted programming itself is to a great extent the historical creation of middle-class white parents (Davis 1988, 294).

This wishfulness is questionable; there is great tension between those utilitarian and individualistic pulls.

There are further philosophical problems with the perspectives on potential developed above. Firstly, whether individualistic, sentimental or economic, the promise of 'potential' risks being self-fulfilling. Announcing that something or someone has potential which could be actualised or fulfilled may precisely bring about success. In other words, the very utterance that 'this child has potential' is performative; potential here functions as an educational narrative because the celebrated 'success' of many children to 'fulfil their potential' validates a posteriori the identification of that potential by the educator. More generally, the notion that children as a cohort 'have potential' is part of what motivates the educational endeavour. Without the notion that children may achieve in the future greater things than those we can imagine now or that will occur through biological maturity, we would not be so motivated to equip them with the intellectual tools to fulfil that potential. We would not, either, embark on large projects to equip society with the economic tools to fulfil that presumed potential. Large ambitions of helping humanity achieve its 'full potential' are regularly at the heart of declarations by philanthropists or politicians, who see their investments as breaking barriers between current human achievements and future, better ones. Potential, in this vision, is perceived as insurgent, solely restricted by barriers of economic and social injustice.

A recent example of this belief can be found in Mark Zuckerberg's pledge, in November 2015, of a significant part of his fortune for what he calls the 'advancement of human potential'. The term *potential* is mentioned eleven times in his letter to his newborn daughter (which constitutes his pledge), and the rhetoric employed clearly conveys the faith in an existing potential of humanity simply requiring to be unlocked by economic means:

> Today we are robbed of the potential so many have to offer. The only way to achieve our full potential is to channel the talents, ideas and contributions of every person in the world. (Zuckerberg 2015)

Zuckerberg's trust that potential is merely waiting to be released by financial resources is philosophically highly problematic, in that it assumes a neat continuity between economic growth (or economic equality) and the realisation of all that was latent in humanity's march towards progress. In its naïve optimism, it highlights the power of belief in human potential within efforts to promote higher social and economic equality.

One could argue that this is precisely a reason to maintain this benevolent myth, but of course it is not solely benevolent: its corollary is that many children's presumed lack of potential in the eyes of society and of educators is a central cause of exclusion and educational inequality. This mirrors precisely Plato's advocacy in *The Republic* of the 'noble lie' that children are born with differing value, and calls to mind subsequent critiques of this myth as unethical and undemocratic (Dombrowski 1997). Worse still, the belief that some children may have a lot of potential indeed—but for crime and delinquency—has been used in the past few decades to justify policy measures aiming to detect behaviours judged to be deviant in sometimes very early childhood.[2] That notion is validated, too, by academic sources, with the American Psychological Association (APA) website listing many 'signs of potential violence' in youth, including 'Young age at first violent incident', which is defined as a 'historical and static', and therefore 'unchangeable',

[2] In France, for instance, the debate surrounding detection in kindergarten of children with potential for violence has been a recurrent topic of interest for the right since Nicolas Sarkozy first evoked it in 2005.

factor (APA 2015). While it is evident that the APA voices these concerns with thorough back-up from research, the rhetorically convenient use of the term potential runs the risk of solidifying such signs into evidence of, rather than being somewhat predictive of, future wrongdoings.

Secondly, all conceptions of potential pose the problem of conceptualising something that is both *present* and has to be *brought about*. Talking about a child's failure to fulfil their potential evidences this issue. Did that child ever have potential, if it was not fulfilled? Talking about evanescent 'innate abilities' or intelligence does not solve the problem; we fall back into the question of performativity developed earlier. If this child's potential was not fulfilled, why? Maybe the educational system did not give the child enough 'opportunities'. But then, what did the child's potential consist of, outside of those opportunities? It also seems rather inhumane—if not nonsensical—to imply that the current adult is a 'failure' because s/he is not quite the same adult that we wanted the past child to become. As far as both the individual and society are concerned, only one of these two adults—the real, rather than the imaginary one s/he 'failed' to become—can be of any value in the world.

But it is on an ethical level that those conceptions of potential in educational discourse are particularly problematic to us. They are, we argue, not so much *unethical* as *non-ethical*; by accommodating unquestioningly the individual and the social, the economic and the sentimental, they entirely silence the necessary and problematic fact of intersubjectivity. The addition of each individual's potential, we argue, does not so easily equate to 'the potential' of all—or of 'humanity'. There is no simple equation between self-actualisation and economic benefit. Each child's potential, in the simplistic and vague discourses of education outlined above, is an asset for society dwelling alongside other such assets—the potentials of other children. There is an assumption that the primary aim of helping each child 'realise' or 'fulfil' their 'potential' will automatically lead to general improvement; potentials are implicitly understood as additive. But there are no evident concerns about the encounters with other subjectivities that individuals will necessarily undergo. Of course, one could argue that, either in the context of a competitive educational and professional environment, or in a culture of unjust oppression or discrimination, the fulfilment of children's potentials simply requires superseding others in their own quest. But even those who advocate the pre-eminence of the competitive principle in society must pause to consider the prospect of it being applied from an early age within education, not least given the disparities in children at entry (Jonathan 1997; see also Dorling 2015 on the consequences of this practice regarding social and economic inequality).

This view is thus ethically problematic because it fails to address in any measure the question of interpersonal relationships, and the problem of the subjectivity of others in one's path. In search of ways forward, we now turn to one recent educational approach that does address issues of inter-agency.

Potential Without Limits? The Case of 'Learning Without Limits'

From 1999 to 2004, a team at the University of Cambridge sought to challenge the belief that children's ability, which they understood to be used interchangeably with 'potential', was fixed (Hart et al. 2004). They collaborated with a primary school in Hertfordshire, England, to create a school culture in which children's potential was perceived as limitless and unknowable in advance, and in which a pedagogy of 'transformability' was instituted that sought to remove all barriers to what children could do in the eyes of students and teachers alike (166). Researchers drew on understandings from Russian education and

Confucian philosophy, suggesting that humans are perfectible and that those who have attained less have more 'potential' in that they have more scope for improvement (19). A key aim was to break the link between class difference and expectations for achievement.

The success of this initiative within The Wroxham School has led to the project's widening influence, and an extended analysis of the culture of collaboration that made this possible (Swann et al. 2012). Of interest to the current analysis are the three principles identified as core to the success of the initiative: 'trust', 'everybody' and 'co-agency' (46). By rejecting the concept of individual children's 'potential' as indistinguishable in use from 'fixed ability', the project team embraced instead the idea that children could achieve anything within a trusting, collaborative and empowering environment—one that also fostered for the existing and emergent distinctiveness of individuals by seeking to offer new experiences and unexpected encounters that are intrinsically educative. Theirs is a dual focus on individuals, and on their engagement with others and the wider community, in promoting children's development.

This approach seeks implicitly to reject the understandings of potential discussed above by addressing their ethical and individualistic deficits. But while this is welcome, we want to challenge it for three reasons. Firstly, 'potential' need not be synonymous with ability, as we will try to show below. Secondly, the genuine tensions that exist within and between different understandings of potential are rooted in societal tensions that do not disappear when the term is abandoned—or even, as with the 'Learning without Limits' example, when explicitly inclusive principles are actively applied. Thirdly, we will argue that the model of learning 'without limits' is less meaningful than a model that recognises and embraces the inevitable and fruitful limitations that exist when agents act among each other in unique contexts. In response, building on the concept of co-agency, we will now try to redefine potential as a characteristic of the challenging interactions between individuals, others and their environment.

Reconceptualising Potential

The Necessity of Intersubjectivity

From our perspective, the 'problem of others'—a central notion in the existentialism of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre—is a blind spot in current conceptions of children's potential. Advocating the fulfilment of hypothetical 'potentials' of individual children either ignores the point at which any one potential will clash against that of others, or assumes that one will normally and unproblematically win against or supersede the other. In existentialism, this question is germane both to the human condition and to the ethical relationship. Others are not pliable objects, however much we would like to reduce them to that state (and however much they objectify us in return). Other people have, if they do not live completely in bad faith, complex *projects* they are attempting to realise. These projects are not fixed and their outcomes are not necessarily known; they emerge from the sensation that one is at a distance from oneself (Sartre 1958). But other people are not, either, free-flowing, independent subjects: they have, like we do, a baggage of *facticity*, in the form of commitments that they have contracted and limitations that are imposed on them by both natural and sociocultural conditions.

Existentialism makes a great deal of the moment of encounter between two different individuals—two different projects—which often lead, in the Sartrean view, to conflict and

objectification (1958). However, from other existentialist perspectives contemporaneous to Sartre (such as Simone de Beauvoir 1948/1967) and neo-existentialist approaches to education (such as Michael Bonnett 1994; Gert Biesta 2006), there can be a necessarily messy but also productive encounter with otherness, which accepts the limitations that others place on our projects without falling into a subjugated position. This is perhaps the only ethical position: a recognition that the other, too, is trying to achieve something—to fulfil an elusive potential that here equates to the existential *project*—and yet must do so both with and against us.

We think that this perspective is relevant in trying to understand children's potentials outside of the positions developed above. There is ethical value in *curbing*, or at the very least *rendering provisional*, our conceptions of child potential in the educational endeavour, because there is value in the productive mutual limitations that individuals will by necessity be presenting to one another in the future. Rather than focusing on individual potential, or on a vague notion of the collective potential of an age category, we can think of *situated* or *negotiated* potential: potential to act, in a specific context, on an individual level, amongst others and with enough plasticity to engage with their own projects, respond to them, and be modified by them if necessary. Potential, ethically conceived, is realised through agents' engagement with the problems of otherness in a way that preserves the agency of all (Higham et al. 2010)—at the possible cost of partial compromise or limitation of any or all agents' projects. This view avoids communitarianism by committing to living in difference or 'solidarity' (Bauman 1993, 31)—rather than 'tolerance', which retains fixed moral norms seen as threatened by difference. Dewey's (1966, 41) concept of 'immaturity' is helpful in capturing the particular emotional pull of children's potential in this definition, not as a lack of maturity but as a positive feature of youth: a flexibility, readiness to change, and recognition that attitudes and values are still in formation. We believe this has emotive as well as logical force.

Situated potential is no longer possessed by any individual, but is rather a possibility for action and a disposition of mind which, among specific others and stimulated by specific environments, may lead to meaningful action. Potential, in this view, is perceived as a fragmentary and unpredictable project, deeply dependent on individual circumstances and intersubjective encounters, which may arise in a given context. I do not 'have' potential, therefore: I 'have' a situation, limitations, desires, an education and a faint sense of being underdeveloped; when I meet you, who 'have' similar issues, we develop alongside one another in possibly conflictual, possibly rewarding ways. Whatever we may create and however we may be changed by this encounter does not so much fulfil our existing potential as generate and shape it. In Arendt's (2006) terms, potential becomes the situated possibility of 'action', where action is the momentary expression of uniqueness through engaging with others—since without others, directly or indirectly, one cannot act. Biesta calls this 'coming into the world' (2006, 91): an ethical engagement with others through which one's unique perspective intersubjectively shapes and is shaped by a shared reality. It demands a move away from potential as unidirectional *power* towards potential as multidirectional *influence*. It offers the hope that all children can become agential subjects through interacting ethically with others on the basis of solidarity in difference. This does not mean that all worthwhile experiences must be interpersonal: as Bonnett analyses, introspection and encounters with the non-human can also be situations for 'coming into presence' (2009). However, we would argue that the meaning of such encounters remains shaped by prior dissonances resulting from engagement with otherness.

On a psychological level, this vision of potential is a welcome relief from the burden of implausible sentimentality and instrumental heroism which are germane to soteriological

conceptions of potential, and the calculating interest of economic or utilitarian conceptions. It affords the possibility of mutual subjectivity in a world otherwise so dominated by individual goals. It also recognises the intrinsic difficulty of engaging with others, across the differences and constraints that others place on us; it is a demanding, ongoing and irresolvable process.

Implications for Educational Practice

How might this negotiated vision of potential be fruitfully put into practice in education? We have argued above that children's potential should be understood as situated; as the *context* for inter-subjective agency; this is explored briefly below in relation to the concept of challenge and conflict, and then through an example of an educational approach that reflects, to a degree, our theorisation.

For potential to be realised through inter-subjective agency, members of the school community must engage with difference, and learn from the limitations that this imposes to their own projects. Biesta's 'pedagogy of interruption' (2006, 91) describes teachers' role as principally to question, challenge and unsettle students' current understandings through the presentation of contrasting perspectives; it is then the process of trying to bridge the gap between those perspectives that leads to new understandings shaped by interpretations of both positions, going beyond acceptance or rejection and emerging instead from creative tension. Such a pedagogical approach is thus an inherently difficult, risky process—Biesta calls it 'transcendental violence' (ibid.)—but one that preserves the possibility of agency with and around others.

Higham (2016, in press) has taken this further, arguing that learning to engage ethically with difference in situations beyond the classroom, where no teacher is there to guide and provoke, requires development of relevant dispositions—crucially, that of 'openness to difference'. This necessitates a 'pedagogy of challenge' in which young people are put in unfamiliar, difficult and open-ended situations which require their response—much as they may have been, and will be in the future, in non-school contexts. This understanding of challenge is very different from that used to interpret influential work by educational psychologists such as Vygotsky and Czikszentmihalyi. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development, for example, has been used to understand challenge as the spur to bridging the gap between where the student currently is and where they are expected to be (Vygotsky 1978); 'Flow Theory' (Czikszentmihalyi 1997) has been applied to advocate finding the optimal level of challenge, balancing the student between anxiety and relaxation, to maintain interest and focus on the task. Both are framed within a teacher-led, known-outcome framework that objectifies the encounter with difference in terms of the individual learner's prescribed development. A pedagogy of challenge substantially removes such scaffolding and oversight, affording encounters that allow participants far greater freedom to act, often to come into conflict and to fail as a result, and to learn from the experience. In such situations, the students' trust in teachers' commitment to developing their potential both mitigates risk and spurs valuable interaction.

Higham (2012) studied a five-day residential course for ten teenagers, designed to build leadership skills. In addition to traditional outdoor education activities such as orienteering and bridge-building during the day, the young people budgeted and shopped, planned activities, and cooked and cleaned, throughout the whole week. This high level of responsibility and interaction caused significant tension and often overt verbal conflict, both in the context of outdoor tasks, and in social and domestic situations. In subsequent interviews, participants acknowledged that there had been a high level of arguments and

disputes, but almost universally pointed to these as their most valuable learning experiences on the course—despite the fact that in nearly all cases those arguments were not directly or immediately resolved. Participants also said that through the course they had come to value most highly the perspectives of others that were most different to their own. Finally, in interviews 3 months subsequently, participants played down those disputes by instead emphasising their sense of collective bonding.

Higham's hypothesis is that participants, after these moments of challenge and conflict, experienced a sense of dissonance between the person they felt they would have liked to have been in those situations, and who they saw themselves to have been in practice—akin to Sartre's sense of not being fully formed. This dissonance, however conscious or unconscious, seeks resolution in subsequent relevant situations (Howe 2009). Several participants made specific mention of challenging situations after the course in which they felt they responded differently as a result of what they had learned through prior experiences (Higham 2012). They also concurred that their confidence, and their team and leadership skills, had developed as a result. This is a small-scale but concrete example of the possibility of developing young people's potential by situating it in a possibility-rich context for intersubjective agency, in which a sense of solidarity in relation to shared projects was developed. Crucially, and consonant with existentialist positions on 'mutual recognition', the *difficulty* of these experiences, characterised by challenge and conflict, was the catalyst for dispositional change.

Conclusion

We have argued that the concept of children's potential has great emotive and rhetorical force, but that inadequate theorisation—and failure to challenge misleading uses in academic and political contexts—has prevented us from harnessing this to help shape educational practice. If we wish to assert that all children should be supported to develop their potential, then this must happen *with and against* others, rather than *over* them. It requires developing dispositions for ethical, critical and cooperative engagement using influence rather than power. It requires also that we see educational contexts as sites for intersubjective engagement, rather than competitive sites of assertion of the primacy of each individual's destiny without regard to those of others. Finally, it looks to embrace the difficulty of this process, rather than circumscribe or deny it, as intrinsically valuable and educative.

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