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Knowledge, education and social change: Exploring efforts to move beyond objectivism and relativism

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ABSTRACT

Learning to address the unprecedented, and increasingly existential, challenges confronting humanity requires the development of increased levels of intersubjective agreement about goals, normative principles and values, as well as effort to apply normative ideals to the needs of society. Yet deliberations about such questions have often been hamstrung by tendencies towards either extreme relativism, on the one hand, or rigid orthodoxy, on the other. Drawing on the work of Bernstein (1983), Seung (1993) and others, this article explores efforts to move beyond the traditional dichotomy between objectivism and relativism in processes concerned with the generation and application of knowledge for the purpose of contributing to constructive social change. To gain insight into how such an approach might find expression in an educational setting, the preliminary results of a case study of the approach to 'moral empowerment' taken by the School of the Nations, a Baha'i inspired school in Macau, are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Objectivism and relativism; normativity; knowledge; ontology and epistemology; Baha'i inspired education; moral empowerment

The field of education faces a unique challenge. On the one hand, there is increasing recognition that the conditions of the world urgently require that educational approaches evolve to equip students with the capacities they need to address the unprecedented challenges that manifest themselves in a variety of ways from the local to the global levels. These challenges include environmental and health crises, polarization of groups and social conflict, extreme economic inequality and prejudice in numerous forms, to name a few. At the same time, advancements in knowledge and developments in the scientific and technological realms have created opportunities for collaboration and cooperation on a scale that is unique in human history. As observed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently, these developments highlight the critical role of education in preparing young people for their role in the world:

> In the face of an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, education can make the difference as to whether people embrace the challenges they are confronted with or whether they are defeated by them. And in an era characterised by a new explosion of scientific knowledge and a growing array of complex societal problems, it is appropriate that curricula should continue to evolve, perhaps in radical ways. (OECD, 2018, p. 3)

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Though there is recognition that the conditions of the world require a significant evolution in the field of education, discussions about a vision of social progress and its educational implications give rise to issues that are deeply normative in nature and corresponding questions about the nature of normative knowledge. In particular, the question arises whether normative phenomena are purely socially constructed and, consequently, entirely relative to a particular culture or society, or whether they have an ontological foundation that transcends cultural contexts. Underlying this question is an unresolved tension between relativism and objectivism that has been present for centuries. As described by Bernstein (1983):

> Each time that an objectivist has come up with what he or she takes to be a firm foundation, an ontological grounding, a fixed categorical scheme, someone has challenged such claims and has argued that what is supposed to be fixed, eternal, ultimate, necessary, or indubitable is open to doubt and questioning. The relativist accuses the objectivist of mistaking what is at best historically or culturally stable for the eternal and permanent. (p. 9)

While relativists have exposed flaws in the claimed firm foundations of knowledge that have been advanced by objectivist thinkers, objectivists, in turn, point to the inconsistency and paradoxical nature of relativists' position, noting that relativism itself is a truth claim about the nature of reality, a claim which, to be consistent with relativism's premise, could be false. Bernstein articulates the dichotomous premise underlying the historical impasse between objectivists and relativists in the following terms: '*Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos' (1983, p. 18). Significantly, however, he sees this dichotomy as being 'misleading and distortive' (p. 19) and believes a path beyond objectivism and relativism can be found.

This article explores efforts to move beyond the traditional dichotomy between objectivism and relativism in processes concerned with the generation and application of knowledge for the purpose of contributing to constructive social change. Drawing on the work of a number of thinkers, an approach is identified which is based on a foundational ontology and non-foundational epistemology. This approach involves generating insights about the application of transcendent normative principles that are seen as having an independent existence through processes of rational intuition, communal interpretation and dialogue, application of principles to concrete situations, and reflection on experience. The perspective recognizes that human understanding of such principles is necessarily limited at any given point in time, and that they find expression in a variety of context specific ways. To gain insight into how such an approach might find expression in an educational setting, the preliminary results of a case study of a Baha'i inspired school in Macau, whose approach appears to be consistent with such an ontological and epistemological orientation, are reviewed and discussed.

Theoretical background

Moving beyond objectivism and relativism

In exploring a path beyond objectivism and relativism, Bernstein (1983) begins with a review of the development of the postempiricist philosophy and history of science, noting in light of the work of Kuhn (1970), Gadamer (1975) and others that one of the most significant trends in this movement is the retrieval of the hermeneutical dimension of scientific endeavour. Rather than the sciences (whether natural or social) advancing by resort to a fixed algorithm that produces certain and objective knowledge, there is increasing recognition that subjectivity, interpretation, reasoning and persuasion play a critical role in the adoption of scientific theories and the development of human understanding. Building on the work of a number of thinkers, Bernstein highlights the critical role of tradition, interpretation and practical judgment in scientific advancement, noting the 'open and anticipatory' nature of the process of human understanding (1983, p. 139). An emphasis on the

social nature of the construction of scientific knowledge, however, should not be taken to mean that interpretations are arbitrary. Drawing on insights developed by Gadamer (1975), Bernstein notes:

> We should always aim (if informed by an "authentic hermeneutical attitude") at a correct understanding of what the "things in themselves" say. But what the "things in themselves" say will be different in light of our changing horizons and the different questions we learn to ask. (1983, p.139)

In the case of conflicting judgments, over time, 'in the course of further scientific development the force of arguments in support of one of these conflicting judgments does become decisive for the community of relevant scientists' (Bernstein, 1983, p. 57).

Bernstein stresses the interrelationship between hermeneutics and *praxis* in the development of knowledge. The advancement of understanding entails both interpretation and application. The process of application, in turn, involves *phronēsis*, 'a form of reasoning and knowledge that involves a distinctive mediation between the universal and the particular' (Bernstein, 1983, p. 146). Significantly, in order for *phronēsis* to occur, a community with shared norms and principles is required. This creates a problem, however, as 'we are in a state of great confusion and uncertainty (some might even say chaos) about what norms or "universals" ought to govern our practical lives' (Bernstein, 1983, p. 157).

Bernstein goes on to weave together strands of thought from thinkers including Gadamer, Habermas, Rorty and Arendt. He finds in their ideas 'a current that keeps drawing us to the central themes of dialogue, conversation, undistorted communication, communal judgment' and 'the goal of cultivating the types of dialogical communities in which *phronēsis*, judgment, and practical discourse become concretely embodied in our everyday practices' (Bernstein, 1983, p. 223). Bernstein thus highlights the development of community and the significant role of communal deliberation grounded in hermeneutical interpretation and practical action, and in particular, the value-informed judgment called for by the concept of *phronēsis* in overcoming the longstanding dichotomy between objectivism and relativism. A great strength of Bernstein's analysis is the insight it provides into the importance of community, interpretation, dialogue, the interplay between principles and concrete issues, and learning what works in practice, to an approach to knowledge generation that seeks to move beyond a dichotomy between objectivism and relativism. A question remains, however, as to the source and nature of the normative standards that are to inform such processes, and in particular whether they are purely products of social construction that are entirely relative to a given culture or society or have a transcendent existence.

A number of different approaches have been taken to addressing the challenge of justifying normative standards. Seung (1993) notes that the 'easy answer' has been the approach of normative positivism, which sees the norms and standards of a given culture as social facts that can be investigated and described. As different societies have different norms, 'a normative judgment that is true in one culture may be false in another' (Seung, 1993, pp. 213-14). The descriptive approach of normative positivism thus leads to cultural and moral relativism. The practices of a society can only be critiqued in light of the societal norms that underly them.

MacIntyre (2007) takes this point even further, proposing that the failure of the Enlightenment project to find a rational basis for morality has resulted in the rise of 'emotivism', a doctrine characteristic of modernity that sees moral judgments as nothing more than expressions of preference (p. 13). To address this challenge, MacIntyre seeks to ground a definition of virtue in the notion of goods internal to practices. A virtue, according to this view, 'is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 222). While MacIntyre's account has been influential in educational philosophy and provides practical insight into how virtues can be cultivated through participation in practices, it, like normative positivism, has strong relativistic tendencies. As noted by Carr (2008), '[i]f virtues are relative to socially constructed cultural traditions and practices, and such traditions and practices may vary to the point of incompatibility or incommensurability, then incompatible or

even contradictory qualities of character may count as moral virtues in different times and places' (p. 111).

In both the case of normative positivism and the approach of grounding virtues in practices, only a process of internal critique, within a given culture or practice, is possible. The focus on internal societal standards is a serious limitation of normative positivism. As noted by Seung (1993), '[w]e cannot be content with an internal critique of Nazi Germany or of our own culture' (p. 14). A similar limitation arises in the case of practices—a critique of slavery based on standards internal to that practice clearly is not morally acceptable.

Another approach to the challenge of justifying normative standards has been through efforts to find a rational basis for transcendent normative ideals on the basis of intersubjective agreement under conditions of fairness. Prominent among these is Habermas's (1984, 1998) theory of discourse ethics. According to this theory, transcendent substantive moral principles should be formulated through communicative action (as contrasted with strategic, self-interested action) whose purpose is to develop mutual understanding and agreement through rational deliberation based on compelling reasons:

> The goal of coming to an understanding is to bring about an agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another. Agreement is based on recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness and rightness. (Habermas, 1998, p. 23)

Based on the recognition that discourse can be manipulated to serve the interests of powerful groups, among the conditions that are necessary to the approach of discourse ethics are freedom from domination and coercion, truthfulness, equality of participation and an orientation towards the best interests of all (Kelly, 2000). Habermas sees the normative principles of discourse ethics as having their basis in the nature of linguistic intersubjectivity. They are seen as being derived from the nature and structure of language and reasoning, rather than having a basis in an independent moral order.

Habermas's theory provides important insights into some of the prerequisites and conditions required in order for deliberations on normative matters to be safeguarded from forces of oppression. It has been noted, however, that while Habermas has sought to ground substantive moral principles in procedural mechanisms seeking to foster fair conditions for intersubjective agreement, the procedural mechanisms that have been identified are themselves based on substantive normative ideals. As described by Kelly (2000): 'A tension emerges within Habermas's justification of discourse ethics: although his "post-metaphysical" philosophy attempts to repudiate foundationalism, his "formal pragmatics" appears to take on the role of foundationalist "first philosophy"' (p. 234). The normative standards that underly Habermas's formal pragmatics seem to appeal to transcendent ideals, such as fairness, freedom from domination and equality. If, on the other hand, the normative aspects of the procedural standards that are to lead to substantive moral principles are themselves purely a product of intersubjective agreements of a given society, linguistic or otherwise, it would appear that the same relativistic challenge arises that is faced by the approaches of normative positivism and grounding virtues in practices. As noted by Karlberg (2020), 'normative standards internal to a given social formation offer no ultimate basis for challenging social norms within that social formation' (p. 139).

Another prominent effort to find a rational justification for moral standards is the theory of justice developed by Rawls (1999). Rawls proposes that principles of justice on which the structures of society are to be formulated should be developed behind a 'veil of ignorance', which prevents people from knowing their place in society and how they might be advantaged or disadvantaged by different social arrangements. This, it is proposed, will lead them to structure society in a way that is fair to all. Rawls uses a 'thin theory of the good' to justify the adoption of two principles of liberty and equality from behind the veil of ignorance. Through the application of these principles, a fuller theory of the good is developed. The question of the source of the 'thin theory of the good' used to

justify the two basic principles of liberty and equality raises similar issues as that of the source of Habermas's principles of discourse ethics. Rawls appears to be a resorting to transcendent normative standards in this aspect of his theory. As noted by Taylor (1989):

> we recognize that [the two principles of justice] are indeed acceptable principles of justice because they fit with our intuitions. If we were to articulate what underlies these intuitions we would start spelling out a very 'thick' theory of the good. . . . The theory of justice which starts from the thin theory of the good turns out to be a theory which keeps its most basic insights inarticulate. (p. 89)

In search of transcendent normative standards

In reviewing the various approaches to normative justification above, two primary challenges arise. One is the potential for extreme relativism in approaches that rely solely on internal societal standards. The other is the tendency of approaches that seek to ground normative justification solely in intersubjective agreement to still resort to intuitions about transcendent normative ideals. This is indicative that a source external to the norms and values of a given society, practice or intersubjective arrangement is needed. An illuminating perspective on how such an approach might be conceived can be gained from the work of Seung (1993). Seung draws insight from Plato's notion of Forms, which he describes as 'the normative standards that transcend the positive norms of any culture or society' (1993, p. 214). Notions of the existence of transcendent normative standards can also be found in Nussbaum's (1993) assertion that there are 'features of humanness that lie beneath all local traditions and are there to be seen whether or not they are in fact recognized in local traditions' (p. 3), as well as Carr's (2008) observation that 'virtue is fairly recognisable by the same fundamental features in a wide diversity of cultural contexts' (p. 112).

Significantly, Seung distinguishes between 'skyscraper' and 'bedrock' conceptions of Platonic Forms. The skyscraper version 'paints a lavish picture of Platonic Heaven. . . adorned with a complete system of normative rules and standards' (Seung, 1993, p. xii). The claim of the bedrock version is more modest. In the bedrock version, 'Platonic Heaven gives only the basic normative ideals' (Seung, 1993, p. xii). These two versions of Platonic Forms suggest quite different approaches to normative deliberations. According to the skyscraper version, the task is more formulaic and rigid—what is required is to discover the aspect of the complete system of normative rules and standards that applies to a given issue and simply apply it. Presumably, there would be little room for thought or discussion. The bedrock version requires a different approach—basic normative ideals cannot be applied in a formulaic way to diverse and complex social issues and contexts. A process of social constructivism, based on rational intuition about fundamental normative ideals and a process of learning about their application to specific issues, is needed in order for these ideals to find greater expression in society.

Seung (1993) notes that without resort to transcendent normative ideals, 'we would be prisoners of our positive norms' (p. 210). He states:

> By the power of Platonic Forms, we can take a critical stance toward the prevailing norms. By virtue of their transcendent standards, we can feel the injustice inflicted on strangers on the other side of the globe. By virtue of those standards, we can feel indignation at the oppression of the weak, not only in our age but even in antiquity. Platonic Forms enable us to have a sense of justice that cuts across all national boundaries and cultural barriers. They give us a transcendental intersubjectivity of values that is neither propped up by our voluntary mutual assurance nor imposed on us by external coercion. There is no way of accounting for this dimension of intersubjective experience without accepting Platonic Forms. (Seung, 1993, pp. 209-210)

The notion of the existence of transcendent normative ideals that Seung articulates, drawing inspiration from Plato, points to an additional feature of a path that seeks to move beyond the traditional dichotomy between objectivism and relativism. The idea of the existence of basic normative ideals that transcend the culture and practices of a given society carries with it elements of objectivism. Normative ideals are taken to exist in a manner that is independent from existing

culture or social practices and to provide standards by which norms and practices of a society can be critically examined. However, due to the general nature of the normative ideals and the limitations of human understanding, a deeply creative social process is required in order to learn to apply them. Moreover, while avoiding the extreme of pure relativism, normative ideals could find expression in a diversity of context-specific ways. As put by Seung (1993), 'Platonic Idealism requires not only fidelity to transcendent norms, but also sensitivity to concrete situations in the articulation of those norms' (p. 218). In addition to the need for sensitivity to context, an important safeguard against fanaticism and rigidity is provided by the knowledge that our understanding of the ideals at any given point is fallible and only partial at best. The path that emerges, as explained by Karlberg (2020), thus blends a foundational ontology with a non-foundational epistemology.

Learning to apply normative principles

An approach that is consistent with a foundational ontology would add to the dialogical process of interpretation and practical judgment described by Bernstein a communal effort to identify and apply transcendent normative ideals through rational intuition. As described by Karlberg (2020), such an approach requires 'the conscious and intentional application of normative principles—such as the principles of justice, equity, and human dignity—to processes of collective decision-making, action, and reflection' (p. 42). Critically, implicit in this approach is the notion that not all views related to normative questions are of equal validity. While none can claim to understand the essence of a normative ideal, some truth claims are closer to that ideal than others. A process of communal dialogue, judgment and practical action that is grounded in intuitions about transcendent normative principles can enable a society to progress closer to normative ideals:

> Under the right conditions, public deliberation can lead to relatively high levels of confidence in intersubjective conclusions based, in part, on the exercise of intuitive faculties of discernment. This is one of the reasons so many people today can confidently assert that slavery is a violation of basic normative truths—moral or spiritual truths—while assertions to the contrary no longer have any credibility in most contemporary public discourse. (Karlberg, 2020, p. 43)

To review the discussion so far, this article began with the proposition that increasingly pressing global crises and opportunities require that education continues to evolve to develop in students the capabilities needed to contribute to constructive social change. As this inevitably involves deliberation on normative questions, a significant obstacle to this endeavour is presented by tendencies towards either extreme relativism, on the one hand, or rigid absolutism, on the other. Drawing on the work of a number of thinkers, an approach that seeks to move beyond these extremes was then explored—one that blends a foundational ontology with a non-foundational epistemology. This approach posits the existence of 'bedrock' transcendent normative principles that can only be partially understood at a given moment and can be increasingly embodied in social reality in a diversity of context specific ways. This occurs through a process that is fundamentally interpretive, dialogical and communal in nature, requiring the collective identification of relevant normative principles, deliberation on their application, action to bring about change and reflection on experience to assess progress towards normative goals. Through such a process, gradual advancement is made towards generating the knowledge required to address complex challenges and build a society that increasingly reflects fundamental normative ideals.

To gain insight into how such an orientation might find expression in an educational setting, the next section provides a brief introduction to the concepts of 'Baha'i inspired education' and 'moral empowerment' and shares some of the preliminary findings of a case study of the School of the Nations, a Baha'i inspired school in Macau. The school has been selected for study according to an 'operational construct' sampling strategy, which 'involves selecting for study real-world examples (i.e., *operational* examples) of the constructs' that are of interest (Patton, 2015, p. 289). The construct that is of interest here is an approach to the generation and application of knowledge about normative phenomena that blends a foundational ontology with a non-foundational

epistemology. For reasons outlined below, it appears that aspects of the school's approach are consistent with such an ontological and epistemological orientation and consequently, exploration of its experience may provide some insight into some of the dynamics fostered by such an approach.

Preliminary case study findings

Baha'i inspired education and moral empowerment

The term 'Baha'i-inspired education' refers to educational endeavours that draw on teachings and principles of the Baha'i Faith, along with insights from educational theory and practice, in order to contribute to the progress of society. Central to the approach of Baha'i inspired educational efforts is the gradual articulation of an evolving framework of principles, beliefs, values, approaches and methods within which a process of learning unfolds. Farid-Arbab (2016) offers the following clarification in a recent work on Baha'i-inspired education:

> The term "Bahá'í-inspired" is in need of some clarification: The educational endeavors thus designated do not include religious instruction. Like followers of other religions, Bahá'ís, too, engage in the study of the history of their Faith, its laws, principles, and tenets. These are not, however, the topics addressed in the kind of programs with which we are concerned. Nor is the object of study individual and social codes of conduct "inspired" by the teachings of the Faith—a Bahá'í version of moral education. "Inspiration" in this case refers to the framework of thought and action within which educational experience unfolds, a framework that . . . is to be continually elaborated and refined. Programs are expected to develop through a dynamic process of action and reflection on action, a process well informed of various theories and practices in the field of education. Those involved in such programs are not exclusively Bahá'ís; they include a range of like-minded individuals who agree on the fundamental elements of the evolving conceptual framework. (p. 5)

The passage notes that Baha'i inspired education is distinct from both religious instruction and 'a Baha'i version of moral education', and highlights the centrality of an evolving conceptual framework to such endeavours. The framework is not rigid or static, but rather is 'evolving' and 'continually elaborated and refined', with educational programmes developing 'through a dynamic process of action and reflection on action'.

The idea of operating within an evolving conceptual framework is perhaps indicative of a feature of an approach that is seeking to move beyond a dichotomy between objectivism and relativism through a dialogical process 'in which *phronēsis*, judgment, and practical discourse become concretely embodied in . . . everyday practices' (Bernstein, 1983, p. 223). The framework contains elements which provide normative guidance to educational efforts. However, the application of these elements to specific circumstances requires a process of consultation, action and reflection on action among a community of inquirers who agree on the fundamental elements of the framework. This mode of operation is perhaps suggestive of a process that involves 'fidelity to transcendent norms, but also sensitivity to concrete situations in the articulation of those norms' (Seung, 1993, p. 218).

To gain further insight into the evolving conceptual framework that is emerging in the field of Baha'i inspired education, it is useful to consider the concept of 'moral empowerment', which has come to be an important organizing normative goal for numerous initiatives operating within that framework. The concept of moral empowerment originated from the experience of the Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Science (FUNDAEC), an influential Baha'i inspired organization founded in Colombia in 1974 whose efforts in the field of education for development have been described in a Brookings Institution report as 'catalyzing an education revolution' by 'transforming how education is conceptualized, designed, and delivered' (Kwauk & Robinson, 2016, p. 7). Farid-Arbab describes the founders of FUNDAEC seeing the concept of 'moral empowerment' as emerging from two interrelated sets of normative teachings of the Baha'i Faith: the evolution of human society and the oneness of humanity. According to these teachings, humanity is seen as

having been engaged in an evolutionary journey consisting of different phases, analogous to the progression of a human being through infancy, childhood and adolescence and eventually to maturity. Throughout this journey, human civilization has been progressing towards higher forms of social organization:

> From its earliest beginnings in the consolidation of family life, the process of social organization has successively moved from the simple structures of clan and tribe, through multitudinous forms of urban society, to the eventual emergence of the nation-state, each stage opening up a wealth of new opportunities for the exercise of human capacity. (Baha'i International Community [BIC], 1995)

The present phase of humanity's development is described in Baha'i teachings as a period of turbulent transition, marking the beginning of its passage to maturity. The oneness of humankind, a key corollary of which is the concept of unity in diversity, is seen as the fundamental organizing principle of the age of humanity's maturity. Progression towards a civilization that reflects the principle of the oneness of humanity brings with it new opportunities for the development of human potential and requires transformation at both the individual and structural levels:

> As social organization has increased, the scope for the expression of the capacities latent in each human being has correspondingly expanded. Because the relationship between the individual and society is a reciprocal one, the transformation now required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions. (BIC, 1995)

Farid-Arbab describes how the interplay of Baha'i teachings related to the oneness of humankind and the evolution of society led the founders of FUNDAEC to articulate a 'twofold moral purpose' of their educational endeavours: 'the empowerment of the individual to assume responsibility for developing those virtues and powers required of her as a member of a human race now entering its age of maturity, on the one hand, and of consciously contributing to organic change in the structures of society, on the other' (2016, p. 8). The term 'moral empowerment' is used to indicate 'both the process and the goal of educational programs that seek to enable students to take charge of their own intellectual and moral growth and to contribute to the transformation of society' (Farid-Arbab, 2016, p. 13).

The description above indicates that there are certain foundational normative principles upon which the concept of moral empowerment is based. Rather than 'a complete system of normative rules and standards' that is to be rigidly structured or formulaically applied, however, it would appear that the approach to normative phenomena is more of a 'bedrock' version, involving learning to apply 'basic normative ideals' in diverse contexts (Seung, 1993, p. xii). These normative ideals include the foundational principle of the oneness of humankind and the understanding that humanity is undergoing a process of maturation, as well as the related concept of moral empowerment, which are some of the key elements of a framework within which Baha'i inspired educational programmes develop through 'a dynamic process of action and reflection on action' (Farid-Arbab, 2016, p. 5).

Case description

The School of the Nations (the "School") was founded in 1988 and offers education from the kindergarten through secondary levels. It is composed of around 700 students, approximately 80% of whom are local to Macau, with the remaining 20% originating from a range of countries. The school identifies itself as a local school with an international outlook, and instruction takes place in English and Mandarin. In keeping with the concept of moral empowerment described above, drawing on normative principles from Baha'i teachings, such as the oneness of humanity, the independent investigation of reality and the equality of women and men, the School's aim is to empower students to take charge of their own intellectual and moral growth and contribute to the progress of society. Towards this aim, at the secondary level, in addition to offering international

programmes and qualifications such as the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, the school has been implementing a Moral Empowerment through Language (METL) Programme since 2007. The METL Programme is a slightly adapted version of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme, which was developed by a network of Baha'i inspired organizations throughout the world, coordinated by the Baha'i International Development Organization (formerly the Office of Social and Economic Development) at the Baha'i World Centre. This three-year programme provides participants with an opportunity to study and discuss stories containing normative principles and themes and explore the application of these principles and themes to their lives and the needs of society. The methodology of the programme as implemented at the School includes the formation of small groups of Primary 6 and Form 1 students (aged 11-13 and described as 'junior youth') who study and discuss a series of texts facilitated by pairs of older peers—Form 4 students (aged 15-16 and described as 'animators')—who have previously participated in the programme and undergone intensive training in their Form 3 year. In addition to study and discussion, the groups, which meet weekly over the course of an entire academic year, consult about needs in their surroundings and plan and carry out small acts of service intended to contribute to the betterment of their communities. The processes of the METL Programme at the School are supported by a specially trained group of teachers, coordinators and administrators who provide training, support and guidance to the animators and the groups of junior youth they are working with.

Methods

The initial phase of the case study was carried out from November 2020 through November 2021. It included semi-structured interviews carried out by the author with six participants—two coordinators of the School's METL Programme and four students from the Form 4 through 6 levels of the School. In addition, nineteen audio recorded interviews carried out by staff of the School with Form 4 students were reviewed. Anonymized transcripts of the twenty-five interviews were created, which were reviewed and coded, resulting in the identification of themes that appeared on a repeated basis. A spreadsheet containing a 'thematic analysis' was then created which included excerpts from the interview transcripts correlated with various themes.

The results of an anonymous online survey carried out in April 2021 by the School with 48 Primary 6 students about their participation in the METL Programme were also reviewed and analysed. Similar to the analysis of the interviews, the responses were coded and a spreadsheet containing a thematic analysis was created. The study also involved primary document analysis, including of the School's curricular materials and website content.

Findings

The following subsections share some of the preliminary findings from the case study. Due to the limited scope of this article, the review of findings focuses on three areas: the School's conceptual framework, curricular content and programme methodology.

Operating within an evolving conceptual framework

Both document review and interviews with staff at the School indicated the centrality of operating within an evolving conceptual framework to the School's approach to education. A section of the School's website, titled 'Conceptual Framework', states:

> From its early years, the school elaborated a conceptual framework that explains the beliefs, principles, values, methods and approaches that guide its efforts. This framework has served to inform its vision and help chart its course over the years.

The website describes some of the categories of elements of its conceptual framework:

> One element of this framework is comprised of fundamental beliefs, such as those related to the oneness of humanity, the evolution of society, the purpose of education and the nature of the human being. Another element relates to the values the school strives to uphold, as expressed, for example, in its emphasis on cooperation and selfless service to humanity. Methods and approaches oriented towards fostering a systematic process of individual and collective learning constitute another element of our framework.

This site goes on to provide brief descriptions of a few of these elements, including the 'oneness of humanity and evolution of society', 'the aim of education', 'service', 'human nature', 'intellectual and spiritual development' and 'methods and approaches'.

One of the School's Educational Empowerment Officers, who, together with a colleague, is responsible for coordinating the METL Programme, also highlighted the significance of the School's conceptual framework:

> This whole idea about having to frame your thought and action within . . . a conceptual framework is very important. And this framework itself consists of many elements. One way of guiding thinking is to group them into various groupings or categories. . . . One of those categories will be something to do with our guiding principles. . . . One way of looking at guiding principles is almost like seeing it as a normative truth. . . . It's like there is something that guides humanity. . . . Whether we are aware of it or not . . . there [are] forces in society . . . that [are] propelling humanity . . .from . . . one stage of its development to the next. It is something that humanity has always been interacting with. . . . So all those things seem to interestingly revolve around this idea of a standard, that we agree that this is something that we want to learn or interact with in order for us to grow or in order for civilization to advance.

These findings appear to provide support for the centrality of a conceptual framework to the School's approach to education, and the importance of normative principles as an element of that framework. The School's website describes some of the elements of its framework, including normative principles, and how the framework has guided its efforts and development throughout its existence. The Educational Empowerment Officer's comments also highlight the importance of the School's framework and the role of normative principles as an element of the framework. The interviewee went on to share a perspective that such normative standards have an independent existence, and some of the implications of this idea for the School:

> this principle is something real . . . independent of us. So then the school begins to ask more questions. Basically we don't think we have the answer. . . . it's almost like asking yourself what is the next thing that we need to do, given this broadened idea of this principle or the implication of this principle. Then we begin to think about … how do you prepare the teachers in terms of teacher training? How do you make sure that the group of animators, the senior students, are prepared to be more effective mentors to the [middle school] students?

The interviewee describes a belief in the independent existence of normative principles, perhaps similar to the Platonic conception of Forms described by Seung. At the same time, the comments suggest that this belief does not lead to thinking one has all the answers, which appears to suggest a 'bedrock', rather than 'skyscraper', version of the Forms. The interviewee describes the belief in independent normative principles as leading to the posing of questions and a search for how practice can continually improve in light of such principles. This perspective is also articulated on the school's website, which states: '[m]aking the elements of our framework explicit, and regularly revisiting them, enables us to strive towards increasing consistency between aspirations and actions, belief and practice'. This combination of reference to normative ideals that are seen as having an independent existence and making effort over time to increasingly align practice with ideals appears to be suggestive of an 'open and anticipatory' approach that blends a foundational ontology with a non-foundational epistemology.

Curricular Content

The Moral Empowerment through Language Programme, described briefly above, is one of the initiatives of the School that seeks to provide a space in which movement towards the normative principles contained in the School's conceptual framework can advance. A review of some of the curricular materials used in the programme provides insight into some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which it is based and how these find expression in its approach. The following illustrative example is taken from *Learning about Excellence*, a text that is studied by small groups of Form 1 students, facilitated by Form 4 students as described above. The text follows a story that includes an ongoing conversation taking place between some early adolescents and their grandparents about the meaning of excellence. Each lesson contains a portion of the unfolding story related to the overall theme, followed by questions and exercises that assist participants to reflect on the ideas presented in the lesson. In one lesson, the grandmother, Mrs. Chen, explains to her grandchildren that one of the conditions of spiritual excellence is freedom from prejudice. In part of the passage contained in the lesson, Mrs. Chen shares:

> Prejudice passes from one generation to another; that is why we should not blindly imitate others, but rather be engaged in the sincere search for truth. Search of truth with fairness and purity of heart leads us to the understanding that humankind is one. All possess spiritual qualities and talents that need to be developed. Distinction does not lie in outward appearances, but in purity of heart and excellence of character. (DL Publicaciones, 2017, p. 59)

The passage suggests some of the epistemological premises that underly the approach being taken in the METL Programme. It describes the importance of avoiding blind imitation and independently investigating truth, and that there are certain qualities, such as sincerity, fairness and purity of heart, that are conducive to approaching truth. In addition, a fundamental ontological claim about the nature of reality is clearly made—that humankind is one. As described above, the context in which students encounter this statement is through reading and discussing a story of a conversation that unfolds between grandparents and their grandchildren, facilitated by their older peers. The students are invited to consider the ideas presented, discuss them together and draw their own conclusions. In this connection, the lesson from which the above extract is taken includes a series of questions that provide the group with an opportunity to explore further the issue of prejudice, including: '1. Can we be prejudiced without knowing it? 2. Can we be prejudiced if we are just? 3. What can we do in order to free ourselves from prejudice?' (DL Publicaciones, 2017, p. 60). That these questions are explored in a group setting perhaps is indicative of an approach that blends both a dialogical processes of principle-based reasoning, described by Bernstein, and a bedrock version of transcendent normative ideals articulated by Seung. The lesson contains reference to the normative principle of the oneness of humanity. At the same time, space is provided for students to discuss this principle and consider its implications and how it might apply to their own circumstances.

Programme methodology

The importance of communication, discussion and friendship to the process of generating knowledge related to normative principles emerged as a key theme in interviews with staff and students of the School. Both of the School's Educational Empowerment Officers and the vast majority of the students interviewed commented on this aspect of the approach of the METL Programme. One of the School's Educational Empowerment Officers shared:

> If we can't communicate, if we can't share with people what we think, then [it] is really difficult to advance together. In the process of working together, we need each other to contribute to . . . accumulating human knowledge [and] generating new understandings . . . of these principles. So as a construct in this programme, we group the students in smaller groups [to] maximize interaction and also . . . with this understanding [that] the students work better in groups. Because

> [at] that age . . . of 11 to 14 . . . students long for, . . . the feel[ing] that they are part of something. They need to find a place for themselves in this world.
>
> So we thought the best way to go about doing this is with the support of a group of friends. So in the programme . . . we try to . . . engage a senior student so that it becomes more like a gathering of friends and an environment [that] is safe, where . . . you can share things that really matter to you without worry about whether people will laugh at you, whether you'll be ridiculed. So to the extent that we can create this atmosphere, you find the students are very willing to participate in discussions and . . . we like to think of that as generating new knowledge.
>
> The other thing that we talk about [is that] we can't shy away from standards. We can't make it so relative that . . . anything goes. It has to be inspired or contextualized by certain standards. So . . . in the programme students study some . . . stories [containing] themes that we find relevant to that age group. In terms of let's say, how do you go about solving difficulties? How do you deal with despair? What is your conception of hope? What happens if I put in an effort, do I get good result? What is our concept of excellence? How do we learn about excellence [and] work with forces that contribute to excellence? Because this [is] a three year programme for our middle school, as they advance in their study they can begin to find applications of what they learn in real life situations.

The other Educational Empowerment Officer shared:

> The programme's name [includes] 'moral empowerment'. I think empowerment, is a very different word compared to moral teaching or moral lessons. We don't think the student [should] just sit there and listen to the teacher [tell them], 'you should do this, you should do this'. It's actually not helping them to reflect [on] what is actually happening in their daily life. But if they are involved in the discussions . . . it's a communication between the group, . . . and so the animators and the teacher can give them some guidance or see them in a different angle. Because usually the junior youth have a lot of great ideas in their minds but they don't have much space to share it. Also, to have the discussion, friendship is very important. . . . Instead of just one person speaking, everyone in a group can contribute to the ideas and all the service projects. So they're not just sitting there but they're participants.

Comments of students who served as animators in the METL Programme indicated that they recognized the importance of the nature of their relationships with the junior youth in their groups and perceived a connection between the quality of these relationships and the ability of the groups to discuss deeper ideas. An analysis of the 23 interviews with students from Form 4 to Form 6 who had experience serving as animators indicated that 21 of them made comments suggestive of their efforts to move from a relationship that was more distant or involved being in the position of instructing the junior youth in their groups to that of being friends who are exploring and discussing ideas together. Some illustrative comments include:

> I feel like at first when we met them the conversations we've had were not [very] in-depth. But after a few months, maybe it's because we sort of know each other better, we can explore more in depth issues (Form 4 Student 3, 13 April 2021 Interview).
>
> My experience is that I learned how to interact with these kids and how to be a mentor without being too overbearing. . . . So initially it was kind of us versus them because they were kind of acting out and we were trying to control them. But then later when we . . . got to know them and use a more friendly approach we worked better together and we could communicate better (Form 4 Student 5, 13 April 2021 Interview).
>
> They really learned a lot. From the beginning they were just playing around and chit chatting with each other but then they started to focus on the materials and . . . to learn and communicate with each other [about] what this story tells us and what's the lesson that they're trying to learn (Form 4 Student 6, 13 April 2021 Interview).
>
> Every week I'll go down with my groupmate to . . . study with them [and] to share our experience with them and then sometimes we discuss . . . some questions in the book and we listen to their experience and . . . chat with them about their daily life in school [and] get to know them more. . . . At first our relationship was not too close . . . but after we talked in class and we [got to] know

> more about their personality and their daily experience . . . we're getting closer … we slowly became friends and we can share our experience with each other (Form 4 Student 7, 13 April 2021 Interview).
>
> At first they were not really listening to us because . . . I think they were too excited. But now they really listen to us. . . . I think their understanding was pretty good and deep enough because they really understand the story and they can understand the deeper meaning in the story (Form 4 Student 9, 13 April 2021 Interview).
>
> In the beginning of the year, we were . . . in the relationship of teachers and students. At the very end . . . one of my junior youth came to me and asked for my birthday. He is saying . . . he is preparing a birthday gift for me. That surprised me a lot. It's a change of relationship. . . . Instead of teaching them . . . we were learning together and there's more discussion with the junior youth (Form 4 Student 22, 14 June 2021 Interview).
>
> When we first met them it was a bit awkward because we didn't really know how to form this special bond and make them trust us. So everyone was pretty quiet and we had maybe two students who would answer our questions. . . . I think in the beginning I was a bit reticent to go see the kids but then once they started to trust us and we could see that they actually enjoyed being with us I think I was really eager to go see them. . . . Some people who were quite timid they start[ed] to open up more. And then they didn't judge each other as we went through [the books]. (Form 4 Student 19, 31 May 2021 Interview).
>
> They understand a lot more about the concepts in the story compared [to] in the beginning. . . . We can see that they learn a lot of the moral concepts of the story in … the books. . . . It was kind of awkward at first . . . because we weren't really close but then as time goes on we were a lot closer together and then in class we will sometimes . . . talk and have fun together. . . . I'm only a little bit older than them, we should really have some . . . impact for them because they will see us as friends rather than teachers and . . . we won't give them pressure . . . we learn together with the junior youth. . . . I think I've learned from the story as well . . . I think it kind of changed my thinking [about] my own life (Form 4 Student 11, 13 April 2021 Interview).

These comments indicate the value students serving as animators placed on the quality of their relationships with the junior youth in their groups, and their recognition that as they grew closer to and established bonds of friendship with the junior youth over time, they were able to engage in deeper discussion related to the concepts in the stories they were studying and share experiences with each other. The comments suggest that the approach the animators were striving towards was one of open communication, discussion and mutual learning. The dynamics described by these students are perhaps suggestive of those of 'communicative action' described by Habermas, with its emphasis on 'intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another' (1998, p. 23).

A common theme in the students' comments is that these sorts of dynamics took time and creative effort to cultivate and required the groups to overcome challenges. As one student reflected:

> I think communication was actually the biggest challenge for me. . . . In my group, it was a bit hard to get them engaged in the conversation. Because I think that it's not mainly about generation gap I think it's mainly because they see us more [in] the role of mentor so this kind of imbalance of power sometimes can become an obstacle to a very open and free discussion (Form 4 Student 21, 14 June 2021 Interview).

The animator went on to describe how she and her co-animator made efforts to overcome this challenge:

> In between lessons, before we actually go into the book, we would try to learn more about the junior youth. We would try to have casual conversation first instead of directly jump[ing] into the book. I think that built an atmosphere [where] they will see us more as a friend, because, we're . . . trying to learn about their lives, instead of like 'oh we're going to teach you something' (Form 4 Student 21, 14 June 2021 Interview).

As mentioned above, in addition to interviews, the case study also involved analysis of the results of an anonymous online survey carried out by the School with 48 Primary 6 students. In light of this article's focus, the analysis of the survey responses focused on the open ended question, 'What have you learned from METL so far?' 46 out of 48 respondents identified an area of learning related to at least one of the themes of unity, confirmation, hope, justice, service, cooperation, compassion or kindness. The remaining two responses were 'learn some concepts from the book' and 'learned nothing'. Of the eight themes identified, the most frequently commented on were unity (20), confirmation (12) and hope (12), followed by service (7), cooperation (7), kindness (6), justice (3) and compassion (2) (some students' responses contained more than one theme). The respondent's comments fell along a spectrum in terms of their degree of specificity. Some representative responses related to the theme of unity included:

> Unity is the road to peace. (Primary 6 Student 5)
>
> I have learned about peace and unity. (Primary 6 Student 10)
>
> I learned about unity and 'confirmation'. (Primary 6 Student 11)
>
> I learned about any people can be united. (Primary 6 Student 14)
>
> We learnt about service, we also learnt how to cooperate, and that even if you disagree, you don't have to fight. (Primary 6 Student 18)
>
> I learn that unity and diversity is very important because if we don't have it, then our communities will tear apart. (Primary 6 Student 22)
>
> I learned in METL that even though people are in different regions, we all are the same, we are who we are. We learn to forgive and forget the bad things that happen to us and look bright at the future. (Primary 6 Student 23)
>
> In METL, I have learnt that we should treat others equal and with kindness even if they have different culture, background. I've also learnt how to share my ideas with other group members and how to communicate with them. (Primary 6 Student 38)
>
> That no matter if people from your group are young or old, you can still have fun, and have friendships with them. (Primary 6 Student 42)
>
> I have learned that we have to be united and we have to care about others, for example, if someone is getting bullied in class, you have to tell the teacher, and another example is when you are in a group project, we have to share ideas and when someone has another idea, you also have to consider their idea, not just your own idea. (Primary 6 Student 44)
>
> I learn that even though we are different we still need to accept other people ideas. (Primary 6 Student 46)
>
> I had learned that even though you are different than others or don't know each other you must still help them. (Student 47)

These comments reflect varying degrees of engagement with the normative ideal of unity. The comments include ideas related to the overarching normative principle of the oneness of humanity, as well as insights into the meaning and application of the principle in different contexts. Students' comments suggest they were learning about unity both through the content they were studying as well as through the interactions within their groups. Some students' comments point to a recognition of the importance of dialogical processes and dynamics, such as the importance of considering the ideas of others and not allowing differences in views to become a source of conflict. Taken together, the comments of the junior youth, animators and staff of the School perhaps provide some glimmerings of the way in which an educational approach that is based on a foundational ontology and non-foundational epistemology might assist small communities to begin to coalesce through interpretive and dialogical processes seeking to learn about and apply normative ideals.

Conclusion

History has demonstrated that intersubjective agreement about normative principles, and collective efforts to translate such principles into reality, have been critical to movements towards unity, justice, equity and environmental stewardship. The harmful consequences of the breakdown of such intersubjective agreement are also all too apparent. This article has briefly explored some efforts that have been made at the levels of thought and action to move beyond a dichotomy between objectivism and relativism in order to generate and apply knowledge for the betterment of society. The approach posits the existence of 'bedrock' transcendent normative principles that can only be partially understood at a given moment and can be increasingly embodied in social reality in a diversity of context specific ways. This occurs through a process that is fundamentally interpretive, dialogical and communal in nature, requiring the collective identification of relevant normative principles through processes of rational intuition, deliberation on their application, action and reflection on insights gleaned from experience.

Employing an operational construct sampling strategy, to gain insight into how an approach that blends a foundational ontology with a non-foundational epistemology might find expression in an educational setting, some preliminary findings from a case study of the approach of 'moral empowerment' being taken by the School of the Nations in Macau were discussed. It should be noted that the study was carried out at a relatively small scale, and there are limitations to the tools that were used for data collection. Moreover, the School readily acknowledges that it is at an early stage of learning about how normative principles can find expression in its educational processes. It hopes, for example, to extend the approach of having older student serve as animators working with groups of junior youth to all three years of the METL Programme, including Primary 6, Form 1 and Form 2 (currently it is only being implemented in this manner at Primary 6 and Form 1), and to explore the feasibility of having animators work with the same group of junior youth over the three years (presently most are only serving in this capacity during their Form 4 year, and not during Form 5 and Form 6). The School also is working to strengthen the service component of the programme, to provide greater opportunities for students to learn through action about the application of normative ideals to concrete needs of their communities. How the exploration of normative principles and concepts, such as those being explored in the METL Programme, might be integrated into other subject areas is another object of learning.

Despite these limitations, there appear to be some promising preliminary indications that aspects of the School and METL Programme's approach are assisting students, from a relatively young age, to develop their capacity to engage in collective exploration of normative principles and to consult about the application of these principles to their lives and the conditions of society. One point that is interesting to observe is that there are indications that an approach to the generation and application of normative knowledge that is based on a foundational ontology and non-foundational epistemology seems to both require and stimulate the development of certain kinds of relationships and attitudes among the participants in a learning process. It is heartening to observe that it appears that rather than leading to rigidity, dogmatism or conflict, some of the attributes that appear to be emerging in the relationships between the participants in the process are friendship, trust and openness, as well as mutual support and persistence in overcoming challenges. While a great deal remains to be learned, perhaps what is most encouraging to observe is the readiness of the younger members of society to support one another to engage with normative principles that perhaps could be described as 'transcendent'—such as the oneness of humanity and unity in diversity—and play their part in building a world that increasingly reflects such ideals.

Disclosure statement

In accordance with my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am disclosing that I am a consultant to, and serve on the board of directors of, the parent body of the school that is the subject of the case study in the article.

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