

School Closures, Community Goods, and (Mis)Recognition

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Educators, school leaders, and educational policy makers are frequently faced with decisions that demand trade-offs between different values. However, deliberation about questions of value too often takes place in general terms about student achievement or else is ignored entirely. As a result, educational decision-makers often fail to identify the values relevant to particular policy decisions, their relative priority, and/or their relationship to empirical judgments.

To help address this challenge and encourage normative reflection in discussions of educational policy, philosophers of education have articulated different frameworks that show how value judgments can be incorporated alongside more technical considerations of practice and policy. Recently, in *Educational Goods*, Harry Brighouse, Helen Ladd, Susanna Loeb, and Adam Swift argue that educational decision-makers ought to attend to values beyond student achievement as measured by standardized tests.¹ They argue that schools produce a wide range of what they call educational goods and that educational policies should be evaluated in light of their impact on this broadened conception of what it is schools do. Brighouse et al. define educational goods as the “specific knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes needed to enable people to flourish, and to contribute to the flourishing of others.”²

In this article, I focus on the decision-making framework developed in *Educational Goods*, evaluating it in light of recent debates over school closures in Chicago. Although I affirm the need to develop language to deliberate about value trade-offs inherent in decision-making, I argue that the book’s too-narrow focus on educational goods constitutes a serious shortcoming. *Pace* Brighouse et al., I argue that schools serve important community functions that are not reducible to their role as sites for the education of young people and that play an independent role in supporting the ability of young people to flourish.

I defend three central claims in this essay. First, I argue that schools – alongside other neighborhood organizations – function as community hubs, helping to foster valuable social capital that plays a key role in ensuring conditions under which the lives of young people may go well. Second, I argue that understanding the school as a community hub helps us to understand community resistance to school closures and takeovers, which is often centered on the value of local social and organizational ties. Third, I argue that the failure to recognize the value of this social capital threatens the equal standing of those members of the community who insist these ties do have value for them. Although any given school closure or takeover may on balance be the right decision, I argue this failure to see local social capital as valuable threatens to turn into what Nancy Fraser calls *misrecognition* – a kind of injustice whereby the equal status within a political community of an individual or entire group is threatened.³ This, I argue, has implications for the flourishing of young people facing the closure or takeover of their school.

A FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

Educational Goods does two important things. First, it works to clarify the set of values most relevant to educational policy. In spite of their importance, the values underpinning policy discussion are not always made explicit, at least some of the time because the relevant decision-makers themselves are not clear about what values are at stake. Here, values are understood as “whatever is good or right about an action or state of affairs, what it is that makes them valuable.”⁴ *Educational Goods* identifies three different categories of value: educational goods, distributive values, and independent values. I mentioned educational goods in the previous section. They consist in a set of “knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes” necessary for flourishing.⁵ Distributive values have to do with how educational goods are distributed. Finally, independent values are values outside of education itself that must often be traded off against educational goods. These three different categories of value each contain multiple elements.⁶

| <i>Educational Goods</i> | <i>Distributive Values</i> | <i>Independent Values</i> |
|---|----------------------------------|--|
| Capacity for economic productivity | Equality | Childhood goods |
| Capacity for personal autonomy | Adequacy | Parents' interests |
| Capacity for democratic competence | Benefitting the least advantaged | Respect for democratic processes |
| Capacity for healthy personal relationships | | Freedom of residence and of occupation |
| Capacity to treat others as equals | | Other goods |
| Capacity for personal fulfillment | | |

The second important thing *Educational Goods* does is offer a framework for decision-making in educational policy that incorporates both empirical questions and questions of value. Brighouse et al. name four distinct elements of sound decision-making:

- (1) Identify the main values in play
- (2) Identify the key decisions relevant to those values
- (3) Assess the options in light of the values and evidence
- (4) Establish what is the best policy overall in the circumstances⁷

No educational policy decisions will be free of trade-offs among goods, if only because the necessary time or money required to make that decision could have been spent elsewhere. Frequently, policy decisions will require non-trivial trade-offs among educational goods and independent values. Educational policy decisions will also impact the distribution of educational goods, effecting trade-offs between different people as well. By insisting that decision-makers clarify the relevant values at stake, *Educational Goods* supports sound policymaking attentive to the complexity of the relevant judgments.

I want to point out two important features of Brighouse et al.'s account. First, the educational goods the authors enumerate all inhere in the individual

student. That is, educational goods are conceptualized as outcomes of the educational process. Relatedly, their value rests on their purported contribution to individual flourishing. This does not mean that they are necessarily individualistic values. The authors make clear that at least some of these goods are valuable insofar as they allow individuals to contribute to the flourishing of others. Treating others as equals, for instance, may be understood as a necessary aspect of living well. More straightforwardly, however, being disposed to treat other as equals is valuable because it ensures we all live in a context in which we can flourish.

Second, while the authors generally talk about education and the importance of educational goods to flourishing, their audience is comprised of decision-makers whose primary responsibility isn't education per se. Rather, their audience consists of professionals who impact *schooling*. They're talking to principals, superintendents, and state and federal policymakers who do not teach but who make decisions that impact outcomes from curriculum to funding for parent outreach programs to whether or not a school opens its doors after hours for a community forum.

Given one and two – that is, *Educational Goods's* narrow focus on educational goods and the fact that its primary audience has control over schools and schooling – I argue that the book's conceptualization of educational goods implies an understanding of the school as exclusively a site for education. An understanding of the school as community center, venue for democratic deliberation, or provider of social services is notably absent. I believe this is a problem. Although the authors acknowledge our ability to flourish demands more than a good education, they fail to acknowledge that more than teaching takes place within the four walls of the school building. Later, I will argue these other school functions are also important to supporting the ability of young people to flourish.

The authors might respond that considerations like these are the precise reason they incorporated other goods within their independent values category. In *Educational Goods*, other goods functions as a placeholder for all of the other goods that must be traded off against educational goods when making policy decisions. I think this response is insufficient for two reasons. First, when talking

about other goods, the authors explicitly and exclusively discuss values unrelated to schooling, naming “health, transportation, housing, [and] environmental protection” in particular.⁸ Second, given the emphasis in the rest of the book on educational goods and the lack of discussion of any community roles schools may play, the idea that educational decision-makers ought to pay attention to the community role of schools is, at best, underdeveloped. While Brighthouse et al. do note that other goods contribute to flourishing and that determining how to distribute resources to these various goods depends on weighing their contribution to overall flourishing in the present and in the future, I believe an explicit articulation of the community goods produced by schools is needed.

SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

In this section, I unpack one of the ways in which our social surroundings impact our life chances. I first describe how the organizations in which we spend our time play an outsize role in the quality and size of our social networks, which play a vital role in our wellbeing. Next, I argue that schools are an important site for interaction among community members, facilitating the accumulation of social ties vital to, in particular, the wellbeing of caregivers. Given the wealth of research in developmental psychology showing the importance of caregivers to the long-term wellbeing of children, I argue educational decision-makers concerned with the flourishing of young people ought to attend to the ways their decisions impact caregivers too.⁹

Mario Small offers a helpful account of social capital.¹⁰ He explains that “social capital theory argues that people do better when they are connected to others because of the goods inherent in social relations.”¹¹ Small is particularly concerned with the ways that differences in the qualities of individuals’ networks – what he refers to as “network inequality” – contribute to differences in wellbeing.¹² To understand the origins of network inequality, he focuses on how it is that individuals come to form social and organizational ties. His central premise is “that people’s social capital depends fundamentally on the organizations in which they participate routinely, and that, through multiple

mechanisms, organizations can create and reproduce network advantages in ways their members may not expect or even have to work for.”¹³ In other words, understanding network inequality demands understanding the organizations in which people spend their time.

Small argues that we ought to view individuals as “organizationally embedded actors.”¹⁴ That is, the ties we form – both to other people and to organizations – are shaped by the organizations in which we participate and the ways they structure our interactions with others. He refers to the process by which organizations help their participants form these ties as “brokerage.”¹⁵ Organizations that function as effective brokers help us to build social capital and can increase our wellbeing. However, not all organizations are created equal. Rather, Small argues “that organizations exhibit regular patterns that would lead us to expect some of them to be systematically effective brokers—so effective that, through their effects on social capital, they can measurably effect the well-being of their participants.”¹⁶

To understand what makes an effective broker, Small studies childcare centers in New York City and the many caregivers – mothers in particular – who populate them. Two key findings are worth noting. First, Small found that mothers whose children were enrolled in centers tended to make more friends and were less likely to be socially isolated than mothers whose children weren’t enrolled in centers. Second, mothers whose children were enrolled in centers experienced lower levels of hardship, even controlling for prior levels of wellbeing. Small hypothesizes that this is likely due in large part to both the organizational and social ties mothers forged during their time at the centers. Notably, for low-income mothers, Small found an effect on experienced levels of hardship whether or not these mothers reported that they made new friends at their center. He hypothesizes that this effect is likely due in large part to the organizational ties that mothers made to organizations offering resources valuable to low-income families in particular.¹⁷

Although Small doesn’t discuss schools specifically, his findings suggest that they at least have the capacity to be similarly effective brokers. With respect to social ties, he identifies a number of key features of an effective broker, in-

cluding opportunities for regular and long-lasting interaction in a noncompetitive context. With respect to organizational ties, effective brokers will also tend to have diverse organizational networks.¹⁸ Through PTA meetings, fundraising drives, pick-up and drop-off, as well as sports and cultural events, schools possess many of these characteristics. In particular, given at least potential connections to other state agencies and the fact that many public schools already share space with local nonprofits, I believe there is good reason to believe these schools have the potential to be particularly effective brokers of organizational ties. Following Small's work in New York, this may be particularly important for caregivers in low-income families who are most at risk of suffering severe hardship.

Certainly, we might think that different schools will possess these characteristics to different degrees. We might also think that, for instance, elementary schools that tend to encourage more family involvement than high schools may generally be better brokers. Nevertheless, Small's work provides good reasons to pay attention to the roles that schools play in the creation of social capital. In supporting the wellbeing of caretakers and reducing the levels of hardship they experience, schools support the flourishing of young people by supporting the health of their families. Although schools may play additional important community roles, I believe this role as social and organizational broker is sufficient to show that the implicit understanding of the school in *Educational Goods* needs revising. I hold that insofar as educational decision-makers – principals, superintendents, policymakers – have some control over levers that impact the school's ability to be an effective broker, they ought to pay careful attention to them.

SCHOOLS CLOSURES AND (MIS)RECOGNITION

A discussion of the community role of schools would be incomplete without acknowledging the ways that schools are often understood by residents as the heart of their community. When schools close or are taken over without input, residents understandably feel their standing in the community is challenged, whether or not there exist good reasons for that particular policy

decision. My aim in this section is not to show that school closures and takeovers are always a bad policy decision. Rather, I mean to argue that the failure on the part of educational decision-makers to attend to the role of schools as at least potential brokers of social and organizational ties – that is, to ignore the community goods produced by schools – risks leading to suboptimal decisions that improperly value the relative contributions of educational and community goods to flourishing. Moreover, this failure to attend to the value of community goods at all risks marginalizing the voices of community members in favor of supposedly objective measures like test scores and utilization rates, which constitutes a further harm to community members, families, and young people.

I focus on Chicago, which saw a large wave of school closures in 2013 followed by a smaller wave in 2018. There, parents, teachers, and community activists have all accused Chicago Public Schools (CPS) of failing to recognize the equal standing of themselves and their communities. In 2013, for instance, one local community activist and member of a group of pastors lobbying to halt the school closures argued, “If nobody is going to be heard at the hearings, what’s the use of having the hearings? If it’s a done deal, then stop wasting everybody’s time.” He continued, “This is a mayor that refuses to have a conversation with the people who really do the work.”¹⁹ Echoing the concern about the lack of community input and recognition, Chicago Teacher’s Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis noted that these changes were approved by “an unrepresentative, unelected corporate school board.”²⁰

Again, in 2018, CPS moved to close an additional four high schools in the predominantly African-American Englewood neighborhood of Chicago and to convert a high-performing elementary school into a new neighborhood high school. Acknowledging issues with the earlier round of school closures, CPS CEO Janice Jackson insisted these plans – specifically the decision to phase out the four high schools over time – were informed by community input. She said, “I’ve been in CPS for a long time and have not seen the level of flexibility that’s present in the school action plans that we’re presenting today. Those changes were made because of community input.”²¹ Given that three of the schools slated to close rank among the most under-enrolled and under-

resourced schools in the district, Jackson has at least some reason to think she is doing right by the affected students. A member of the group Parents 4 Teachers, however, disagreed. She argued, “These closings are a scam. They’re not about moving children into better schools, they’re about destabilizing black and brown communities.”²²

Irrespective of the intentions of CPS, many community members felt these school closures as a kind of death. University of Chicago Researchers studying the 2013 school closures found that closings “severed the longstanding social connections that family and staff had with their schools and with one another, resulting in a period of mourning.”²³ Study participants told researchers that they wished their feelings of grief and loss had been validated. Commenting on the strength of ties at schools open for decades, the researchers note that, “Because of these connections, schools foster social cohesion and serve as stabilizing forces in a community. When schools shut down, it can have a destabilizing effect because connections can be severed.”²⁴ These experiences, then, suggest that the social networks formed in and around schools are important both for the individual, who experiences their absence as a kind of death, and the community, which draws from these schools stability and social cohesion. I believe that once we have come to see the school in its capacity as a community institution, we are better able to understand the roles schools play in the lives of community members the sorts of meanings people attach to them. This helps us to understand the objections and concerns raised in places like Chicago over school closures.

I believe the *Educational Goods* framework would have failed at being sufficiently action-guiding for decision-makers deliberating on whether or not to close schools in Chicago. Although members of the closed school communities understood the value of the social ties formed on their playgrounds and in their hallways, decision-makers in Chicago appeared to have missed the value of these ties. The framework, focused on individual capacities, would not have helped to correct this important lacuna. Even had they heard residents and recognized the value of community goods, might CPS have moved to close some of these schools anyways? Possibly, and that may not have been such a bad thing. How

one weighs educational goods, community goods, and independent values is a challenging, context-dependent question. However, I am certain that if one is not looking for community goods at all, one is bound to miss them.

The claims of Chicago residents point towards a second way in which the failure to recognize the value of community goods threatens the wellbeing of young people. I argue that the institutional failure to recognize the value of schools as an important site for the formation and maintenance of local social bonds constitutes a form of misrecognition. Misrecognition, I believe, helps us to understand the claims of residents who argue school closures are efforts to destabilize communities of color and constitute part of a broader pattern of racist neglect. Their charge is that not only are they denied vital educational resources but also that their standing in the city is threatened as CPS policy understands them, their families, and the young people of their community as less than.

To defend this claim, I need to say more about the nature of recognition. Unlike other theorists who have understood recognition in terms of self-realization, Fraser offers a “*status model of recognition*” in which misrecognition is a matter of “*status subordination*.”²⁵ She writes:

To be misrecognized, accordingly is not to suffer distorted identity or impaired subjectivity as a result of being depreciated by others. It is rather to be constituted by *institutionalized patterns of cultural value* in ways that prevent one from participating as a peer in social life. On the status model, then, misrecognition is relayed not through deprecatory attitudes or free-standing discourses, but rather through social institutions. It occurs, more precisely, when institutions structure interaction according to cultural norms that impede parity of participation.²⁶

Status subordination threatens the ability of marked groups to participate in the public sphere on equal terms. Forced to contend with stigmatizing and institutionalized patterns of value, groups suffering from status subordination

suffer from injustice. As examples, Fraser mentions cultural norms that construct being gay as a perversion, “female-headed households” as improper, and blacks as dangerous.²⁷

I argue that under conditions of categorical inequality across multiple domains (e.g. wealth, health, education), ostensibly neutral patterns of cultural value (e.g. standardized test scores) can contribute to misrecognition. The reason for this lies in the fact that we have a tendency to assume that “robust statistical regularities are due to the nature of things.”²⁸ So, when particular groups of students reliably perform worse than other groups of students on standardized tests, there is a widespread tendency to take this statistical regularity as evidence that of students being naturally lower performing, obscuring the complex structural underpinnings of such gaps. The students in the schools, along with their teachers, families, and even the schools themselves, become marked as deficient or deviant, thereby suffering status subordination. I focus on misrecognition in order to call attention to the role played our method of valuing schools in contributing to status subordination. While patterns of systematic disinvestment in particular communities certainly plays a role in this process, I believe that it’s also the case that in failing to attend to the myriad ways schools supporting the wellbeing of our most vulnerable young people in favor of a handful of limited metrics, we create conditions that are inhospitable to participatory parity.

Although arguably this understanding of misrecognition is different from Fraser’s in some respects, I believe my account to be in line with her basic project. She writes that those who make claims for recognition “aim... *to deinstitutionalize patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it.*”²⁹ I believe we should read Fraser here as insisting that all institutionalized patterns of cultural value – whether they be norms around marriage or school standards – be oriented towards ensuring all people can approach one another as equals.

I want to be clear that my point is not that there are no bad schools. In fact, I am sure there are some schools that simply are not very good, neither by the lights of the state nor by the lights of the families supposedly being served. Rather, my point is that adopting a broader conception of the value of a school

will almost certainly reveal that some “failing” schools do some things well, that their teachers and students may even excel in some areas. Given the fact of categorical inequality and our tendency to make essentializing judgments, I believe that broadening our conception of what constitutes a successful school will help prevent the social subordination of marginalized groups. *Educational Goods* certainly goes a long way in helping us to see schools more broadly, providing much needed for vocabulary for considering the range of educational goods they provide. I do not believe, however, that it has gone far enough.

CONCLUSION

I argue that we ought to view schools both as sites for education and as important organizations within the broader organizational ecology of a community. In their first aspect, schools do produce educational goods. In their second aspect, schools serve as community hubs that encourage the creation of social capital, supporting the health of communities and the flourishing of young people. Given the central place of market-based reforms – which turn on the possibility of closing schools that fail to attract student-consumers – within the national educational policy discourse, understanding and deliberating about the community aspect of schools, in addition to their educational aspect, is imperative to understanding the full range of values at stake in decision-making.

In light of all this, the framework set out in *Educational Goods* must be broadened to incorporate community goods. Community goods are those goods apparent when schools are looked at from the perspective of the organizational ecology of a community. They include:

- (1) Connections to outside organizations
- (2) Access to inclusive community space

While these goods are valuable in part because they contribute to educational goods – by providing parents and other community members with resources on which they can draw to advocate for educational reform – they are not reducible to these contributions. Rather, we should understand schools as comprising part of a web of organizations that help to undergird community life, thereby

independently contributing to the flourishing of young people.³⁰

Finally, by attending to these goods, educational decision makers are in a better position to attend to the input of community members who insist on the importance of local social capital. In this way, the threat of misrecognition is diminished, as decision-makers become aware of forms of value they had previously failed to attend to. Although I do believe school closures are a viable policy tool, ignoring the value of community goods threatens to mislead educational decision-makers as to which schools need to be closed and when.

1 Harry Brighouse, Helen Ladd, Susanna Loeb, and Adam Swift, *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision Making* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

2 *Ibid.*, 22.

3 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* II, no. 3 (2000): 107–20.

4 Brighouse et al., *Educational Goods*, 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 22.

6 *Ibid.*, 23, 32–36, 37.

7 *Ibid.*, 76.

8 *Ibid.*, 41.

9 e.g. Leah Matas, Richard A. Arend, and L. Alan Sroufe, "Continuity of Adaptation in the Second Year: The Relationship between Quality of Attachment and Later Competence," *Child Development* 49, no. 3 (1978): 547–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1128221>; Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "American Parenting of Language-Learning Children: Persisting Differences in Family-Child Interactions Observed in Natural Home Environments," *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 6 (1992), 1096; Meredith L. Rowe, "A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Quantity and Quality of Child-Directed Speech in Vocabulary Development: Child-Directed Speech and Vocabulary," *Child Development* 83, no. 5 (September 2012): 1762–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01805.x>.

10 Mario Luis Small, *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

11 *Ibid.*, 7.

12 *Ibid.*, 9.

13 *Ibid.*, 5.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*, 18.

16 *Ibid.*, 21.

17 *Ibid.*, 37–44.

18 *Ibid.*, 21–22.

19 Ellen Jean Hirst and Bridget Doyle, “Chicago School Closings Protest,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 28, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-03-28/news/ct-met-school-closings-protest-0328-20130328_1_school-closings-closings-list-elementary-schools.

20 Staff, “Chicago Board Votes to Close 50 Schools,” CNN, May 22, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/22/us/illinois-chicago-school-closures/index.html>.

21 Juan Perez Jr., “After Emotional Testimony from Opponents, Chicago School Board OKs Closings and Consolidation,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 28, 2018, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-met-chicago-school-closings-vote-20180228-story.html>.

22 Ibid.

23 Molly F. Gordon, Marisa de la Torre, Jennifer R. Cowhy, Paul T. Moore, Lauren Sartain, and David Knight, “School Closings in Chicago: Staff and Student Experiences and Academic Outcomes” (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, May 2018), 4.

24 Ibid., 4.

25 Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London/New York: Verso, 2003), 29, italics in original.

26 Ibid., 29.

27 Ibid., 30.

28 Sally Haslanger, “The Normal, the Natural and the Good: Generics and Ideology,” *Politica & Societa* 3 (2014): 365–92.

29 Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 30, italics in original.

30 I don’t intend this list of community goods to be exhaustive and recognize there may well be others.