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The Big Door Prize: Conceptualising potential in education as an *arrow*

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ABSTRACT

If you were told your life's potential, would it change how you live? This is one of the questions posed in Apple TV's series *The Big Door Prize* (2023). The residents of a small town become fascinated by the MORPHO machine that appears mysteriously one night and dispenses small blue cards with the promise of revealing the life potential of the holder. Consequently, the townsfolk embark on a collective odyssey to understand what is meant by *life potential*. Potential in education is a confusing idea. On one hand, the rhetorical ubiquity of *fulfilling one's potential* suggests it is a finite void within an individual into which all educational efforts should be funnelled. At the opposite end of the continuum, most teachers would likely balk at any mention of a student with *no potential*—almost as unicorn-like as those whose potential has been entirely fulfilled. In this paper, I will embrace this confusion and follow how the characters' notions of potential change in *The Big Door Prize*, using Israel Scheffler's comprehensive conceptualisation 'Of Human Potential' to discuss the characters' journey and determine whether there is another way to think about potential and education.

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Introduction

If you could know your life's potential, would it change how you live? This is one of the questions posed in Apple TV's short-lived series *The Big Door Prize* (Walker et al., 2023), adapted from the MO Walsh book (2020) of the same name. The residents of a small town, Deerfield, become fascinated by the MORPHO machine that appears mysteriously one night and, for the princely sum of two dollars, dispenses small blue cards with the promise of revealing the life potential of the holder. Consequently, the townsfolk embark on a collective odyssey to understand what is meant by *life potential* with sometimes comedic, sometimes tragic, results.

Potential is something that features often in education discourse, probably because education itself could never begin without an assumption that the student has the potential to participate in it. However, it is not always clear which notion of potential is being invoked in this discourse. Considering, for example, the rhetorical ubiquity of *fulfilling one's potential*, it could perhaps be said to be a finite void within an

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individual into which all educational efforts should be funnelled. Such fulfilment may be an admirable goal, but it is less clear what happens when maximum potential is reached. Potency itself, though if we take the word at its root, can only ever be a suggestion of possibility since an overt expression of potential becomes an action; therefore, the potential becomes lost in its own affirmation, leading to a logical absurdity that those who have fulfilled their potential also have none. At the opposite end of the continuum, most teachers would likely balk at any mention of a student with *no potential*—almost as unicorn-like as those whose potential has been entirely fulfilled.

In this paper, I will embrace this confusion and follow how the characters' notions of potential change in *The Big Door Prize*, from their belief in the beginning of a fixed quality held within an individual to its ending as an *arrow*. I will frame this journey using Israel Scheffler's (1985) comprehensive conceptualisation 'Of Human Potential'.

Method—hermeneutics, popular culture and education

Through my broader research, I have been keen to link the fields of popular culture studies and philosophy of education as I note the attention that is given to the areas of popular culture and philosophy, and popular culture and education respectively by dedicated research groups worldwide. Thus, it might be that philosophy of education presents the possibility of a natural further intersection. Philosophers of education Silberman-Keller et al. (2008) suggest that popular culture and education inhabit an 'invaginated space' (p. 2) where it is not possible to study one without invoking the echo of the other.

When thinking about popular culture in relation to education, two modes can be applied. The first is to consider how education features *in* popular culture. What can we deduce about commonly held conceptions of education by looking at these reflections? The second is to consider how popular culture *educates*. In what ways do the popular cultural objects we consume change us or our understandings of the world? In this paper, I have taken the first route as I will be examining the representation on screen of the notion of potential—a salient concept of education. However, I also suggest that any symbiotic meaning making (Fiske, 2010) that occurs as a result of my investigation could be considered educational and would therefore touch on the second mode.

To facilitate my interrogation in this paper, I have chosen two texts to study (invoking the meaning of *text* to include the idea that texts in popular culture include nonprint formats, including television (Hall, 2011)). Despite the differing formats, it is nevertheless possible to follow a hermeneutic methodology in the interpretation of both texts. As Gadamer (2006) rightly pointed out: 'the art of the word and all the visual arts, share in a common endeavour' (p. 58) thus interpretation can (or, perhaps, must) be made in engagement with any such art.

The major tenet of Gadamerian hermeneutics is that the interpreter of any text should, in the interests of transparency, clarify and embrace anything that may influence their understanding, rather than attempting to set aside such influences in pursuit of objectivity (Grondin, 2015). These influences can then be referred to constantly in interpretation, either as a means of confirming or examining the unfolding

understanding of the text(s) being read. Moreso than a systematised methodological approach, my use of hermeneutics in the analysis of the chosen texts in this paper can be considered an ontological one (Macdonald et al., 1995); that is to say, my intention is to alter the boundaries of (my) understanding by offering a reinterpretation of the texts I have chosen towards a particular question I have formulated in relation to my understanding of education.

With this in mind, it is vital that I set out my position as an interpreter and how I came to choose the texts that I did. The first point is partly answered above: I am a researcher with an interest in popular culture and philosophy of education. I can also say that, while I am firmly rooted in an anglophone context with regards to my research and cultural upbringing, I am very influenced by education theory such as I have interpreted it from German and French philosophers and theorists. Therefore, my understanding of education is one that considers education to be an intentional (yet unpredictable), (trans)formative, activity that is not necessarily institutionally bound, in the vein of continental pedagogy (c.f. Friesen & Kenklies, 2021; Biesta, 2013).[1] Such an understanding sees education as a set of relations between a student, an educator, and something in the world to which the educator intends to change the student's relation. This intended change could be a shift in relation from ignorance to enlightenment, or from ambivalence to care. However, education, as it is important to note, still happens even if the intended change does not as it is the process that defines it, and not the end result. For the sake of brevity, I have given an overview of this way of understanding education; however, perhaps the reader can infer that there is much complexity that could arise from such relations and it is not within the scope of this paper to examine them. However, potential does have its place in these relations. The educator's intention, and therefore the beginning of the process of education, as well as the educator's relation to the student, can be characterised by the belief of the educator that the student has the potential to change.

In terms of popular cultural texts, I am bound to be influenced by what is available, and what piques my interest. Heidegger (1993) conceptualises interest as reciprocal inclinations between a person and a thing. It is not within the scope of this paper to examine such a claim, so I will accept that I was certainly inclined to watch The Big Door Prize, even if the only inclination it (or its creators) had toward me was to encourage my subscription to the streaming service on which it was being broadcast.

In any case, recognising how one finds a text, and their first impressions of it, is a necessary reflection for an interpreter to make, and so I will do this now, beginning with The Big Door Prize. The Big Door Prize is adapted from a book of the same name that I have yet to read. Interestingly, however, I am aware that there is a notable difference between the book and the show which may have persuaded me, even if I had read the book, that using the show as a text rather than the book would be more appropriate in a paper relating to education. The mysterious potential predicting machine in the book is called DYNAMIX, but in the show it is called MORPHO and there are striking differences in the connotations of these two words. DYNAMIX is similar to 'dynamic' with its ideas of purposeful movement and endless doing. MORPHO, on the other hand, is clearly referring to the idea of 'morph', and notions of changing and transforming. Morpho also happens to be a genus of butterfly (Rogers, 2018), which is the motif used for the machine's design on the show; but, of course,

butterflies themselves are often held up as metaphors for transformation given the extent to which the caterpillar changes upon its emergence from the cocoon. In a manner that can sometimes be unusual for TV, all of this is rather neatly and subtly employed. Most importantly, though, the idea of morphing as changing is the one most closely related to my understanding of education as given above and so, it is pertinent to consider MORPHO as a machine pursuant to such change.

On first viewing of this show, I was curiously struck by the attention it gave to the concept of potential in a manner that was unusually philosophical (Kierkegaard's existentialism was heavily referenced from episode one onwards). As I watched the characters in the show grapple with their understandings of potential, and as I started to formulate my own questions regarding how we conceptualise potential in education, I then decided to make a search for literature to help me better understand potential as a concept in education specifically.

Upon searching, I found a field of literature that is awash with ideas around how to boost students' potential, how to help them achieve their potential, the potential of other concepts/ideas to education. It was only in Israel Scheffler's book—which he helpfully terms as *An Essay in the Philosophy of Education*—that I found a detailed conceptualisation and definition of potential in education. Scheffler is, of course, not the only philosopher to have written on potentiality and, more recently than Scheffler, the thoughts of Giorgio Agamben on this subject, while not a philosopher of education *per se*, have occupied the writings of contemporary educationalists. In particular, it is important to note that Agamben and Scheffler's conceptualisations have been compared in discourse and an important distinction found: Agamben foregrounds (im)potential as a necessary facet for potential (such as I alluded to in the introduction of this text where I noted that actualisation of potential is simultaneously a negation of it). Scheffler on the other hand considers it as a more affirmative intention to act (Lewis, 2012).

A criticism that Lewis (2012) levels at Scheffler in his comparison with Agamben is that Scheffler, by not considering (im)potentiality, panders to a neoliberal framing of education as pursuant to maximised outputs on standardised tests. However, we might speculate that Scheffler himself exists within that frame, as we all do. Even as philosophers of education might critique the neoliberal leanings of education, it remains the prevailing approach in the schools, colleges, and universities in which many readers of this article may be placed. Vlieghe (2013) notes the reluctance of philosophers of education to use Agamben's ideas, and I suspect that this is because (im)potentiality as the simultaneous possibilities of acting and not-acting present themselves as existential possibilities more so than educational ones (of course, these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive as Biesta, 2013, writes). That Scheffler's ideas are recognisable to educators forty years after the publication of this work, and that alternatives struggle to find an audience even among the philosophically inclined, seems justification enough to revisit and re-examine them through alternate lenses—the combination of a continental pedagogical understanding of education, and a popular cultural object that asks questions of potential outside of the boundary of educational theory and practice.

Of course, both Agamben's and Scheffler's ideas could have been used as the basis of the arguments in this paper. Agamben hints at the unpredictability of potential in education by asserting that it is possible for one to act in any way. On the other

hand, Scheffler errs more towards considering potential as the driver of intention—and, as I have mentioned above, intention is an essential element of the conceptualisation of education to which I subscribe. The intention in education is that something should change (Friesen & Kenklies, 2021). and such change is necessarily precluded by the potential to do so. Therefore, to continue to focus on (im)potentiality may lie just beyond the scope of this work given that education as I define it only implicitly acknowledges (im)potential as a possible end to the educational endeavour.

In the proceeding sections, I will give a brief overview of Scheffler's ideas around potential before going on to look at the three reconstructed concepts of potential that he sets out: Potential as capacity to become; Potential as propensity to become; and Potential as capability to become. I will illustrate how these are either reflected or challenged within the show, and how the show's eventual conceptualisation of potential as an *arrow* can be thought of as an amalgamation of all three potentials.

Of human potential

Scheffler's work was the second of four volumes coming from the Project on Human Potential conducted in 1979–1985 at Harvard Graduate School of Education (Gardner, 2020). Scheffler's intention was to produce a practical theory of potential for educators and policy makers, and to that end, the final chapters of the book give practical demonstrations of how this might work. However, for the purposes of this paper, I am only interested in how he sets out the concept of potential in his trio of reconstructions of potential. Before looking at these, however, it is first vital to set out what Scheffler understands as essential to human potential? The answer to this lies in how he sets out his idea of *human nature*.

Human nature, according to Scheffler, is bound up with ideas of action, particularly a notion of action that is '*purposive*, *symbolic* and *social*' (p. 41, original emphasis). Action here is akin to a 'change mediated by intention and belief' (p. 17), in which the intended outcome might never be realised. The intention and belief in the action are driven by desire, choice, and normative reflection/creation. Given that the process of educating, too, is an action that we can relate to notions of intention, desire, choice, and normativity (Biesta, 2013; Kenklies, 2019), then it is easy to suggest that education is an action of human nature. Potential necessarily precludes the actions of human nature.

Scheffler explicitly relates education to potential when he considers that a newborn infant is indeterminate as a human being until the human action of educating (in culture, in history, in making choices) fills it out. Until such time, it is not unusual to place the newborn into any number of [imagined] possible futures—the realisation of any of them being determined in part by what educators/parents/society do and value; and in part by a belief in the baby's own intrinsic nature that will lead them in one way or another. This is what Scheffler terms 'the language of potential' (p. 42), and while he considers it problematic as a way of understanding potential comprehensively, he admits it is useful as a 'device for discharging our educational responsibilities toward it' (p. 42). As I alluded to in the introduction, I am not so convinced that educators have an educational responsibility for nurturing potential as much as it is an inevitable peripheral action when one employs the intention to change another's relation to something.

'The language of potential' is limited, according to Scheffler, because it gives rise to myths stemming from the idea that people have intrinsic natures, and that intrinsic natures are valuable to realise (for this he blames Aristotle and his enduring metaphysic of essences). Of course, however, we cannot determine any potential that is intrinsic, and therefore valuable, without some kind of criterion (of which there is none). Therefore 'we read our value predilections into such potential' (p. 44). While it may appear initially valuable to develop a student's intrinsic potential, it would be less so the case if the student's intrinsic potential was to become a serial killer. However, the process of education, given that it begins with an educator's intention, must have a desirable end point that is imbued with some kind of value, either the value of the educator or of the institution for whom the educator acts as agent—or both (Robertson, 2022). Thus, value in education drives intention, and intention assumes potential, as mentioned above. Synthetically, we therefore build what Scheffler calls the myth of *uniformly valuable potentials*—clearly, however, not all potentials have the same value, but we build the myth by only acknowledging potentials that are desirable.

As I go through the paper, I will encounter this and the other myths (*of fixed potential, of harmonious potentials*). I will set out Scheffler's three reconstructions of potential as capacity, propensity, and capability. It will be shown that he considers capacity as enabling the realisation of potential, propensity as developing it, and capability as empowering the individual to realise it.

What is further important to note at this point is that attribution of potential in education precludes any intentional action of the educato to realise it (but does not necessarily invoke such action); and that the normative value given to a potential by an educator precludes any attribution. In short, those attributing potential, like the educator, have a great deal of power over the objects of their attribution/intention; just as the MORPHO machine comes to hold great power over the citizens of Deerfield.

Potential as capacity to become

At the show's beginning, MORPHO is a novelty for the townsfolk. They arbitrarily put in their coins, enter their social security numbers, and have their fingerprints taken before the machine prints out their life's potential. At the point when the cards are given to the users of the machine, 'no categorical prediction of future realization is implied' (Scheffler, 1985, p. 47). The machine does not tell the townsfolk that they will definitely be those things in the future; it merely provides them with a card with one or two words written on it. With that in mind, provided that the holder invests in the idea that these cards are predicting their potential, what these cards come to suggest to their holder is merely their *Capacity to Become*.

According to Scheffler, capacity denotes that a person *can*, at some point in the future, acquire some characteristic that allows them to be something, or some skill that allows them to do something. Capacity, as a subtype of potential, is attributed or denied by the educator; just as the MORPHO attributes capacity, *via* the power of suggestion, to its users. However, I do not necessarily agree that it is only the educator who can attribute or deny capacity, or that this can only be attributed or denied from other people in general. The individual themselves can surely

self-attribute capacity/potential, aligning with the metacognitive concepts of self-knowledge and self-efficacy (Pintrich, 2002). In fact, I may suggest that the introjection of another's attribution will at least result in some kind of dissolution into one's own self-concept. This change in self-concept, such that it is affected by an attribution that changes how one may perceive their future, is reminiscent of Dennett's idea that freedom evolves (Dennett, 2003). It can be suggested that this change in self-concept may affect a change in behaviour that once again opens up an uncertain future for the person regardless of the attribution of potential by the educator.

What capacity does not necessarily mean is that everyone who lacks a manifest capacity at a moment in time *will always* be able to achieve it in the future. For example, I do not have, and will never have, the capacity to learn how to drive if I am blind; whereas my friend who is not blind but is impeded from driving because they cannot fund driving lessons, may find their capacity changes over time. The idea of capacity is then both concerned with not only determining whether one can do or be something in the future, but also whether it is ever the case that they cannot be it, and whether it is possible to do something to remove the impediments that deny capacity. This has resonance in education, and notably in formal education where desirable capacities have been identified, and the assumption is that the education system will support all students to acquire such capacities in the future, with considerable efforts made into removing any impediments to doing so, such as: 'biologically preventive factors… prevention of undesirable outcomes… [and] cultural factors' (Scheffler, 1985, p. 49). Scheffler's idea here has implications for notions of educational equity because he reminds us that while it might be true to suggest that some students will never achieve some things, it might be wrong to interpret this as a lack of intrinsic capacity in the student, rather that the impediments to capacity have not yet been overcome. Consider the example of the blind driver above—they will never have the capacity to learn to drive until medical technology or driving assistance becomes as such that they later gain the capacity.

Thus, as Scheffler notes, it is not attempts to change intrinsic natures of students, but a social effort, and I also suggest individual effort in some cases, which may go some way to eliminating lack of capacity and enhancing earlier potential. We could employ what we have, and develop more effective methods, for removing the blockages of biological, social, and cultural factors. Indeed, much educational research is focussed on these areas. It is notable to point out that when these blockages are minimised, or removed, or new blockages appear, then a person's capacity can change, either for better or worse. This immediately challenges the *myth of fixed potentials*. Potentials can change, as on the show, Giorgio—a former superstar hockey goalie - reflects: 'I was brimming with potential until I suffered a permanent injury to my catching hand'. With that seemingly insurmountable blockage, his capacity to play professional hockey was permanently removed.

Problematically, the potentials that are distributed by MORPHO are described as *life potentials*. This gives the impression that one life has one potential, and that this potential, and capacity as its subtype, is fixed to be whatever is written on the card. Such value is placed on notions of potential that when the main character, Dusty, receives the card 'Teacher/Whistler', he is immediately disappointed because he assumes,

as both a teacher and a proficient whistler, that he has reached his life potential and has no further to go. His dejection is a far cry from the idealistic vision of the self-actualised person who has reached their full potential! Given that myth can be described as a seductive image of a world intended to draw the viewer in Sorel (1908), the idealistic vision of a self-actualised person may well be the bewitching picture offered by the myth of fixed potentials and it prescribes to a comforting determinism to be found in metaphors that convey purpose, meaning and destiny in life. This is alluded to in the first episode of the show in which the town priest references Kierkegaard's idea of anxiety as a dizzying freedom (2014) to choose one's own path in life and that belief in a pre-destined path comes as a relief from such an anxiety.

The myth of fixed potentials does not account for the above-mentioned factors that may be removed or introduced in order to increase or decrease capacity to become. Nor does it account for the risky business of education (Biesta, 2013), in which an educator's exercise towards increasing capacity to become may yet never see that capacity realised. Capacity and potential can change, and, ironically, the MORPHO machine helps the townspeople to realise this very quickly as, although it is suggesting life potentials to its customers, randomly or not, how these are interpreted and pursued come to illuminate that anything that proceeds from the dispensing of the little blue cards is entirely in the hands of the individual:

> With additional knowledge available, or an altered allocation of effort assumed, the picture of potential and its prospects may change in quite radical fashion.
>
> (Scheffler, 1985, p. 51)

What happens next in the series demonstrates both this change in picture, and Scheffler's next reconstruction of potential as one's *propensity to become*.

Potential as propensity to become

Propensity, as another subtype of potential, builds on the idea of the capacity to become, but now with underlying conditional predictions: that is to say, it may now be predicted that a person is more or less likely to become something *if* there are no restrictions to them becoming so.

The MORPHO machine makes no such conditional predictions; indeed, while it is not clear where the machine came from or how it operates, as an attributor of potential, we can safely assume it has no knowledge of context or values, neither can it be said to hold a state of knowledge about the person (besides the arbitrary data it collects at the beginning of its process)—all of which Scheffler asserts are necessary characteristics of attributors of potential and he calls this the 'principle of relativity of potential' (p. 58). As such, it should be noted that the MORPHO machine is perhaps not an attributor of potential in any case. The individuals of the town, however, *are* rooted in context, values, and states of knowledge about themselves and others; and, wielding their little blue cards, or with their life potentials emblazoned on sweaters or t-shirts, they set about in pursuit of what they interpret the card suggests they are *supposed* to be (whether they are capable of doing so or not, which will be addressed in the next section). At this point, many of them are still ensconced in hopes of destiny and purpose.

However, not every townsperson is keen to accept what they see as an attribution of potential as their propensity to become. Some receive potentials that are viewed as not desirable ('liar', 'gum', 'ghost') and are keen to hide these or be dishonest about what they got. Others, who receive so-called *good* potentials have their photographs displayed prominently on the wall of the local store. While Scheffler asserts that conditional predictions cannot be value specific, it seems to me that this cannot be the case. If we are considering predictions of desirable and undesirable outcomes, as Scheffler notes that we are, and that we wish to pursue the desirable while impeding the undesirable, then this is inevitably bound up in normative categorisations. The townspeople of Deerfield exemplify potential as propensity to become by acting as propensity attributors, but only if the potential is desirable to them *via* their personal, social, and cultural positioning. This, again, runs counter to the *myth of uniformly valuable potentials*—the idea that all potentials are good and desirable—so mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

Thus, we can say that while the machine may seem to be suggesting an attribution of capacity, it is the townspeople themselves who attribute propensity to themselves and others. However, it cannot be assumed that a passive attribution of propensity from someone else (a neighbour, an educator) can be so accurate in its predictions. We can think of propensity as a judgement of a level of likelihood, but how can we come to such a judgement from a purely external standpoint? While Scheffler continues to note that potential as propensity must not be considered part of an intrinsic nature or essence of the student, it is my view that there must be something internal to the person that drives their inclination or tendency to be one way or the other and negating this must result in only a limited prediction of propensity. Scheffler's view may be clouded given that his overarching aim is that his theory be used pragmatically, and therefore he may be justifiably adopting an educator's purely external stance. He does, however, later come to admit that it is dangerous to fully neglect the insider's (student's) point of view and to take the educator as the principal judgement of potential. It is likely due to the above reasoning that, within the idea of propensity, he appears to disregard at least the intrinsic aspect of motivation (although he will come to mention it under the next reconstruction). I suggest that motivation however, as a combination of internal and external drivers, has a place when thinking about an individual's propensity.

Motivation may very well be considered the psychological manifestation of propensity. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that it can foster or undermine human potentials, just as predictions of propensity might do the same. And, considerations of motivations are, just like Scheffler's idea about potentiality-attributions, more comparative than categorical. It may be predicted that one student will perform better than another on an exam because they have shown up every day and paid attention in class. Perceptions of motivation may have a causal effect on the potentiality-attribution. The same is true in Deerfield. The apathetic teen who receives the card 'Hero' is not at all motivated to become one—he hides his card until he serendipitously saves his school principal from a grisly fate. His father, on the other hand, who receives the card 'Sheriff', spends all of his time and effort to present himself as self-appointed town vigilante, and so the likelihood of his becoming a 'Sheriff' (perhaps not literally, but certainly embodying the values appropriate to one) is seen to increase in the eyes of his neighbours.

I am careful to note that while motivation may be considered a person's internal driver, this does not mean that it is intrinsic or essential to the nature of the person. There may be any number of biological, cultural, and social factors that may have an impact on the motivation of a person, that may, in turn, have an impact on attributions of propensity bestowed on them by themselves or others. When Mr Johnson, the store owner, visits the MORPHO and self-attributes his capacity and propensity to become a magician, things do not go so well and his motivation to perform any further dissipates. However, when the school principal, upon following her life potential, crashes her motorcycle, she is undeterred and tells her students from her hospital bed that she cannot wait to get back on her bike. Her self-attribution of propensity is even stronger despite a perceived failure. These differences in reactions may well be attributed to the differences in the personalities of the people involved which suggests, if I am so bold to advance an idea that one's personality at least starts with a kernel of an intrinsic nature, means that Scheffler, in his bid to exclude intrinsic nature from his definition of potential, might have negated one of the important elements of potentiality-attribution in his model.

However, despite what he has written so far, Scheffler does not create his reconstructions entirely on attributions from others, as we will come to see in his next reconstruction: Potential as Capability to Become.

Potential as capability to become

Potential as Capability to Become 'hinges on the agent's… effectiveness in promoting a designated outcome' (Scheffler, 1985, p. 58).

Scheffler's idea of capability stands apart from the ideas of potential as capacity and propensity. Although I have argued otherwise, Scheffler indicates that capacity and propensity rest on attributions of potential by the educator, whereas potential as capability suggests that the agent (or student) has control over the outcome. Like propensity, Scheffler suggests that capability rests on a conditional prediction of attribution that is also dependent on whether the student has both the capacity and the propensity to meet the attribution. Capability suggests that a person can be reliably expected to be/do something, in a permissive environment, *if they choose* to be/do that thing. This may sound similar to capacity, but Scheffler makes a distinction between capacity as *enabling* to perform and capability as *empowering* the agent to perform by developing in them the skill to do something while leaving open the choice to do so or not.

Gauging potential as capability is to gauge whether one's effort is enough to make a desirable outcome likely. However, this assumes that there would be a means of deciding when the desirable outcome has been met, which in turn means that one can only be deemed to be capable when the requisite level of skill has been deemed to have been achieved. For example, in Deerfield, Mr Johnson receives the potential card, 'Magician', which as I have mentioned is an attribution of his capacity (or he at least interprets it to be so). He sets about practising his magic tricks and cultivates conditions so that he might be able to perform as a magician (relating to both propensity and capability). Yet, when he reaches the apex of his magician's career, and steps on stage to perform in front of the townspeople, his performance is judged by

his neighbours as amateurish and he, therefore, does not reach the desirable outcome that he expected (or that the audience expected). So, while Mr Johnson performs the actions of a magician, it is not at the level required for him to be considered *a real one*.

There are also those townspeople for whom their potential seems like a long shot and any measure of empowerment will be ineffective: Dusty's wife Cassandra receives the card 'Royalty' and, given that becoming royalty is usually bestowed by birthright or marriage, immediately her potential to become royalty is dismissed. She is therefore rendered incapable as her choice to become what is on her card is no longer in her hands. While Scheffler seems to argue that capability is the one reconstruction of potential that depends on the choice and actions of the agent, there is still some reliance on external judgement and conditions (i.e. capacity and propensity) before a person can be deemed to have the capability to do/be something.

Mr Johnson, on the other hand, chose to become a magician. The effective choice to become a magician was in his hands, but it was inspired by the card he received by the MORPHO machine. According to Scheffler, the educator too puts choice in the hands of their student, but unlike the MORPHO, they tend to remove undesirable choices from the range of choices available to their students. As an example, he notes: 'we may want to increase the student's capability to become an athlete or a mathematician, but not a safecracker or a forger or drug addict' (p. 62). It is, of course, the case that even if the educator removes undesirable choices with a view to drawing attention to the desirable few, the student may decide to disregard them—such is the unpredictable element in education (Biesta, 2013). Scheffler further asserts that it is also the case that by empowering in one desirable area, then you are consequently empowering in another undesirable area. He gives the example of the student learning the methods to heal while simultaneously learning the methods to hurt. In a rather brief section, he explains that it is motivation and a sense of responsibility that will send the student one way or the other.

Motivation, as I have described, has internal and external factors. These come to make it a highly individual characteristic of a person. Therefore, one may be more or less inclined to pursue a potential that is un/desirable depending on their personal disposition. A person, of course, does not only have one potential at any given time—this would play into the myth of fixed potentials. Indeed, each person may have innumerable potentials, with expanding and constricting capacities, propensities, and capabilities with regard to each of them. So, what happens if a person has numerous conflicting potentials?

Father Reuben, in the show, receives the potential 'Father'. This is ambiguous and he could interpret this as his religious calling, or as his deeply concealed desire to become a father himself (we later learn that he interprets it to be the latter). These two potentials, stemming from this one card, are in direct conflict with each other, given that priests are supposed to remain celibate. This situation confirms the final of Scheffler's myths: *the myth of harmonious potentials*. It is fair to suggest that a person may hold innumerable potentials, but not all of these will be worth pursuing, even if a person shows capacity, propensity, and capability to do so. Empowerment of the individual to choose takes centre stage now, and if Scheffler is right we should trust in their motivation and sense of responsibility. Perhaps it can be said that the

student's motivation and sense of responsibility might be strengthened by cultivating phronesis—a kind of practical wisdom that would encourage the student to make decisions to act on the best thing to do (Aristotle, 2003). Of course, to know the *best* thing to do requires that one's idea of what is best matches the dominant values shared by the society in which the student (and probably the educator) is situated: 'Knowing and doing can only be valuable when the person who knows, and does, executes these in socially desirable ways' (Robertson & Prajapati, 2025). Nevertheless, the unpredictability of life, and of education, suggests that we should be prepared for the individual to not take the route that we might prefer.

Scheffler's capability reconceptualization of potential, like the educator, would advocate for obscuring the less desirable choices and promoting the more desirable. In the case of our priest, his more desirable choice for himself is probably less desirable for the Church and the townspeople who placed a significant amount of trust in him as their religious leader because of his commitment to the rules of his faith. I agree with Scheffler that the idea of harmonious potentials is attractive. However, when taking into the possibility of innumerable potentials that each much align with individual, social and cultural values, cultivating harmony amongst these would be a veritable impossibility.

The reader will note that, while capacity, propensity and capability are presented as discrete reconstructions, Scheffler suggests they are in fact interrelated as follows (and while he explicitly refers to learning, I will refer to the realisation of potential):

Capacity *enables* realisation of potential: identifying (and perhaps removing) impediments that may prevent the person from being able to do/be something.

Propensity *develops* realisation of potential: identifying and cultivating the conditions that support the realisation of potential (including self-development).

Capability *empowers* the individual to realise their potential: identifying the circumstances in which individuals may be empowered to realise their potential, if they choose to do so.

These are not to be considered steps, but instead 'mutually supplementary schemata for clarifying three important aspects of education and growth' (Scheffler, 65). It can be said that the majority of the townspeople in Deerfield with so-called *good* potentials are embroiled in these dimensions while rushing headlong to fulfil them. However, 'Teacher/Whistler' Dusty takes the entire series to reflect on his own card, and the seeming chaos that is unfolding around him and he observes:

> [There are] fully grown people out there who have suddenly, because of a machine, decided that they don't like what they do for a living, or they don't like their garage, or their partner, or themselves!

This is an explicit statement of the power of potentiality attribution, and, if we were to replace the word 'machine' with the word 'educator', we may find the level of influence somewhat galling, rather than absurd. However, potentiality attributions given by an educator may be even more influential than those of the machine, given that they might also be responsible for not only recognising capacity, as I tenuously suggest MORPHO could be, but also the development and the empowering of the student—and they are likely to do this in a way that matches their own values.

In the end, despite his scepticism of the machine, Dusty has an epiphany that helps him, and others, make sense of what is happening and one which, perhaps, removes some of the power of the potentiality attribution: *Potential is an arrow*.

Potential as an arrow?

> The thing that's written on the card – *Your Life Potential* – that's not the job you're meant to have or the destiny or goals, or whatever. It's not the end of the road, it's a turn. It's an arrow. It's the thing you need to be told about yourself to point you in the right direction.
>
> (Dusty)

Dusty delivers a brief lecture on his theory about potential to his students, his principal, and the town priest. All of whom took the potential on their cards and, by following it (successfully or not), made a change in their lives. The principal, for example, crashed her motorcycle in pursuit of becoming a biker, but if she had not done this then she would not have met her husband. The priest saw his potential as father and decided he did not want to be a priest anymore. Dusty has now re-interpreted his card to mean that he should be a teacher in Whistler, Canada (and not a teacher and a whistler) and while he probably will not pursue this route, it opened up his world to possibilities beyond Deerfield. Unfortunately, his wife also opened up her world and at the end of the series it looks like they will be going in separate directions. Nevertheless, knowing their life's potential inspired a change.

The arrow that Dusty is referring to in his metaphor is a directional arrow, and this once again feeds into potential as capacity, propensity, and capability. The presence of an arrow shows the individual that they *can* go that way, *if* they have/can develop the means to get there, and only *if* they choose to go that way. This is quite a neat metaphor for potential as it also does not assume that the person will act in a particular way just because the arrow offers the possibility to do so. It also relates back to notions of choice and shows potential to be more than an external attribution from someone else.

What this arrow metaphor might also remove, however, is the idea of value that is imbued throughout ideas of potential and attributions of potential in Scheffler's model. Seemingly, there is more than one valid path, and the arrows may be pointing in any and all directions, good or bad. This could not be the case in education, according to Scheffler, as the educator may only present arrows that point to desirable routes. This is not to say that the student may very well lose their way on these routes and end up elsewhere, of course, or have values that conflict with the educator's and deliberately ignore the arrows they present.

Of course, we do not *need* a directional arrow to send us in any direction or another. For a direction to be suggested may only be helpful when the individual is not sure where they are going and whether they can get there; or they are headed in what we perceive to be the wrong direction. It is otherwise a suggestion and, given that I have reinforced the unpredictability in education throughout this paper, potentiality suggestions may be more useful pedagogically than potentiality attributions, especially when considering the aspect of capability as an empowering one. It

is more empowering to suggest to a student that they could do something and allowing them to choose to do it, rather than telling them they will—or perhaps even should—do the thing they have the potential to do.

With this in mind, we can draw some conclusions regarding Scheffler's ideas and the arrow metaphor for how we might change how we think about potential in education.

Concluding remarks

This paper looked at the concept of potential through the lenses of Scheffler's ideas in 'Of Human Potential' and how it is presented in 'The Big Door Prize'. Scheffler's work on its own does something to clarify the concept of potential in education such that, if we follow his recommendation that capacity, propensity, and capability exist as three interconnected schemata, we will find that there can be no fulfilling of one's potential, because it is not a fixed property of a person that can be fulfilled. It changes and develops depending on whether the barriers to capacity can be overcome; the conditions for propensity can be set; and the student makes the decision to act.

I am concerned that Scheffler's model might give too much power to the role of the educator in determining what action they take based on judgements about capacity, propensity, and capability. It is not too unusual for errors in judgement to result in students being overlooked or under-supported due to their potential being under- or over-estimated. It may be that all educators need to concern themselves with is whether their intention to change their student's relation to content is valuable enough to carry out and maybe every other action is but a hopeful (because outcomes cannot be predicted), and tactful (because not every student will respond in the desired way using the same strategy) execution of this. Therefore, this paper represents the culmination of an enterprise to interrogate Scheffler's particular conceptualisation of potential through the lens of another 'text' which suggests another perspective. The resulting suggestion of the 'arrow' metaphor brings together Scheffler's three constructions that gives less power to the educator. Instead, the ambiguity of the arrow's suggestions should widen the possibility of potential in education being seen as a means of empowering students rather than attempting to fulfil a capacity attributed to the student by someone else. Of course, the definition of education that I have employed in this paper means that the educator would still be responsible for acting upon an intention that assumes some potential in the student to change. Thus, while an 'arrow' metaphor may be neat in terms of thinking about potential, it is not a complete answer to the struggle between attribution of potential and the power to act on it. Indeed, we could say that the 'language of potential', that confusing way of talking about potential so set out in the introduction to this paper, is perhaps a reaction to this struggle. If there is a belief that everyone has a potential to fulfil, then such a struggle, as well as the complex relations of education (as I have defined it) in which this belief is situated, can be negated.

Given that the 'language of potential' persists in education discourse, it may be timely to revisit and revise Scheffler's, and others', ideas through alternate frameworks of understanding before potential, and the attribution of it, becomes as meaningless and routine as the MORPHO machine and its little blue cards.

Note

1. The systematic framework of the pedagogical triangle usefully demonstrates the relational, and intentional aspects of education (c.f. Friesen & Osguthorpe).

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