

Character Education in the Public Schools

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What is the responsibility of the public schools in the development of moral and ethical values? V. T. Thayer, formerly director of the Ethical Culture Schools in New York City, discusses this question and suggests that training in "habits of community" defines the unique function of the public schools in this area.

SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT of the first settlements on this continent, Americans have looked to their schools as the custodians of the morals of the community. In New England, for example, the architects of the Holy Commonwealth decreed that all children were to receive instruction sufficient for them to read the Bible and to understand the laws; and in each town of one hundred householders, "those that order the prudentials of the town" were to set up a grammer school to instruct the future religious and civil interpreters and administrators of these laws. For a time, it was commonly assumed that religion and morality were inseparable and that both individual and public morality were conditioned upon religious orthodoxy.

'Habits of Community'

This assumption did not make for peace; nor was it easy to maintain in a country of diverse religious backgrounds, and increasing mobility of populations. Indeed the experience of successive generations demonstrated its opposite; and, with the development of public education in the first half of the 19th century, the secular school came into existence. As the State Superintendent of Schools in New York ex-

pressed it in 1853 (in passing judgment upon a teacher who had punished a Catholic child for refusing to memorize passages from the Protestant Bible):

The position was early, distinctly, and almost universally taken by our statesmen, legislators, and prominent friends of education—men of the warmest religious zeal and belonging to every sect—that religious education must be banished from the common schools and consigned to the family and the church. . . . Accordingly, the instruction in our schools has been limited to that ordinarily included under the head of intellectual culture, and to the propagation of those principles of morality in which all sects, and good men belonging to no sect, can equally agree.

Nearly a century later, Justice Frankfurter restated this basic principle in condemning the program of released time for religious education, as conducted in the public schools of Champaign, Illinois. Religious instruction, aided and abetted by the school, said he, fosters "a feeling of separatism when the school should be the training ground of habits of community."

"Habits of community" is a happy phrase to use in defining the unique responsibility of the public school in the area of moral and ethical values. What does it mean specifically for the schools?

Moral absolutes excluded

Speaking negatively, it excludes moral absolutes, as well as principles of sectarian hue, that derive their assumed validity and their impulsive character from an authority not recognized by the community as a whole. These moral injunctions may have an appropriate place in the private training of the young in the family or in a parochial religious community and are entitled to respect. But a cardinal principle of democratic living is to recognize that what one man or a sectarian group accepts as an absolute can be no more than an open invitation for others to follow as mind and conscience freely determine. In a heterogeneous community, the school can do much to further mutual understanding among its members by conveying knowledge about these sectarian principles (when tempered carefully to age level and special circumstances), but in no way is it privileged to indoctrinate for them.

Morals related to daily experience

Secondly, it helps the teacher to conceive of moral and ethical standards as neither esoteric in character nor essentially alien to the ordinary run of daily experience. The common tendency to identify "good" behavior with a moral kicking against the pricks can be morally stultifying. On occasion, to be sure, moral choices require the sacrifice of a temporary, an irresponsible, or an ill-advised impulse in preference to a more balanced action. But, in the very process of resisting temptation, we are engaged more often than not in a creative act—one in which we have decided to mold our conduct in

the image of what the heart genuinely desires. In sacrificing a short-sighted self we are rewarded by gaining one better and more permanently satisfying.

Values affect personal relations

Finally, in a negative vein, democratic values do not lend themselves to dogmatic and autocratic teaching or to inculcation by dint of superior strength and position. Values both color and shape our everyday associations. They are one with the way man thinks in his heart. Consequently, the wise parent and teacher will keep his eye more on formation of inner disposition and less on mere outer conformity. Education consistent with democracy seeks to foster in the young ways of thinking, feeling, and acting with their fellows that are mutually creative, and that are at once sensitive, original, and unique.

Responsibility of the School

But what can we say more positively of education in moral and ethical values? Since the school is charged with a two-fold responsibility, one to the community and one to the growing person, the teacher's task in this area is complicated. As the agent of the community, he is concerned with transmission of common values; as the teacher of the young, he is equally sensitive to individual style and sincerity of expression, consistent with ease and freedom of communication.

Promoting common values

From the standpoint of the community, the school is charged with the responsibility for promoting common

values. Common, in the sense that all members of the community, good and true, irrespective of race, nationality, creed, or class, accord allegiance to them. Common, in that they have emerged out of long experience in shared interests and have been found to enlarge and to enrich areas of common endeavor.

I refer to principles well-nigh universal, such as the Golden Rule; to the distinctively democratic values of respect for people as persons in their own right; to the ideal that men realize their best selves in cooperative relations with each other, and that one man's right to self-expression is conditioned upon its friendly influence upon his neighbor; and to virtues such as responsibility, honesty, temperance, and self-control. These values are public values in that they are common to all segments of our society, irrespective of religious faith or philosophic school, and all recognize in them the primary conditions of fruitful communication and mutually beneficial relationships of living. As the representative of the public, the school is obligated to educate for common values in ways that are non-sectarian.

Values operative in daily associations

Secondly, values are commonly approved methods of procedure by means of which men deal with each other. They are tested general formulae for promoting the interpenetration of interests; for harmonizing and channeling relationships of a person-to-person, person-to-group, and group-to-group character; for carving out ever wider and more profitable spheres of com-

munity action in a world in which differences and disagreements stubbornly persist.

As general procedures, however, values remain formal and abstract. It is only when applied to specific situations by individuals under conditions that are at once novel and familiar that they come to life. This accounts in part for the ineffectiveness of purely verbal instruction in moral principles. Only in individual action, in the day-by-day associations of people under circumstances that are never quite identical, do values become actual.

Take honesty, for example. Obviously, as a principle to regulate conduct, it means different things at different age levels, and it means different things when applied to the same child under differing circumstances. No longer do we measure child behavior, as we once did, in terms of rigid adult standards, or condemn him as a criminal when he deviates from a mature concept of what constitutes mine and thine. In short, apart from stereotyped, routine, and relatively simple occasions, the honest act requires the thoughtful application of a general principle to circumstances that are never completely repetitive.

As often as not, too, conventional action is blurred by the presence of conflicting suggestions for action, or principles that require individual weighing. Shall we tell a sick friend that he is hopelessly ill, in obedience to the principle of truth for truth's sake? Or shall we encourage him through expressions of confidence to draw upon his reserves of energy and to defeat the predictions of the specialist? That is, the precept of truth-telling cannot be

applied mechanically. It calls for intelligence, and intelligence emerges out of repeated experience in weighing principle against principle and novel data against the facts of yesterday. To become adept in moral action requires practice, first-hand experience under guidance over periods of time to the point where an individual's decisions testify at last to an acquired art.

Finally, with the individual as with the group, education in moral values is one with the acquisition of disciplined ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that have as their objective "raising the standard of our living together."

Personality Development and Character Education

Research in personality development and funded experience in child guidance clinics establish clearly the intimate connection between health of personality and character education. Both have to do with the transactions of people, with easing and freeing of channels of communication between an individual and his associates. To the degree that the needs of personality development are met—the need to belong, to achieve, to be recognized, to be free—to that degree the communion of personality with personality is furthered and the snarled relations of the maladjusted personality avoided. Consequently, to provide a warm and sustaining atmosphere in school and home is a first condition of character education.

With this assured, other things can follow: personal guidance in acquiring the art of creative relations with one's fellows; methods for resolving conflicts, when conflicts occur, that take

account of the interests of all involved and encourage the habit of entering sensitively and appreciatively into the lives of others, as a suggestive basis for devising satisfying formulae that will harmonize and channel interests. This discipline is not so much taught as caught; but there comes a time when, as a result of long practice, its logic can wisely receive conscious formulation as the logic of democratic thought and action.

Education for Democratic Values

This brings us to the practical question of organizing the school with an eye to education in values, a discussion that calls for a book in itself. I hope I have said enough to establish that education in values is one with the total program of the school, beginning, as I have said, with provision for the essential conditions of mental health, and extending through the details of the curriculum and the administration of the school.

In these days of stunted opportunity for young people to play a responsible role in the home and the community, classroom projects and work service programs in school and out that provide the discipline of seeing jobs through to completion and foster the spirit of cooperation are highly important.

Education in values has direct bearing, for example, upon the size of the school unit which, if we are sensitive to influences upon the growing personality, should never reach the point where a child fails to sense his membership in a unified and functioning community. More important, perhaps, is class size, if we would transform

classes into groups that exercise a dynamic influence upon their members.

Finally, there is the curriculum more narrowly conceived. Constructive efforts have been made in recent years to select "materials of learning" and to adapt methods (witness the recent emphasis upon group dynamics) with an eye to the needs of childhood and adolescence. To the extent that the school helps young people to cope constructively with these growing pains and to ease the transition from childhood to adulthood, it educates in moral and ethical values.

What this means in the way of a detailed program, I cannot develop within the limits of this article. I might refer, however, to a recent booklet, entitled *Moral and Ethical Values in the Public Schools of Hawaii*, published by the Department of Public Instruction of Hawaii. Taking four areas—appreciation of self, social sensitivity and competence, harmonizing

of values, and appreciation of man and the universe—this publication illustrates their possible development on all levels of the elementary and the secondary school: in the relation of teacher to pupil, the activities of the curriculum, and the organization and administration of the school.

To conclude, I would emphasize that education in values is less a matter of adding to the regular work of the school than it is a way of ordering the life of administrators, teachers, children, parents, and all others who function in the school community. Values constitute the warp and woof of educational planning. They are the ways in which people come to think, feel, and act in association with each other in all of the relationships of living. They constitute the quality of these relationships. To help young people achieve the moral and ethical values characteristic of democracy is a major responsibility of a democratic school.

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