

MORAL DILEMMAS OF SCHOOLING¹

H. MILLARD CLEMENTS

Lecturer in Curriculum and Instruction, and

JAMES B. MACDONALD

Professor of Curriculum and Instruction

University of Wisconsin, Madison

FOR many years professional educators, under attack from critics and colleagues outside of education, have partially withdrawn from the challenge and responsibility of critically examining what goes on in our schools. This may well be due in some measure to the often irrelevant and sometimes irrational nature of the criticism, which encourages defense of present schooling practices. This is unfortunate, however, for no profession will be able to confront adequately its responsibilities unless it provides for the opportunity to engage in thoughtful criticism of its practices.

Are our schools a desirable place for the education of human beings? Do schools embody in practice the revered humanistic values of our culture? Are the schools essentially moral enterprises?

Educators often debate proposals, clarify aspirations and make plans related to schools. Yet, what sort of life do students and teachers lead in school? Unfortunately, we are apt to assume that noble aspirations, rational plans,

and labored efforts on behalf of our school children result in desired accomplishment. We assume, in other words, that our good intentions and efforts are directly related to our achievements. The Conference on Moral Dilemmas was held in the spirit of challenge to this assumption.

It was not the intention of the speakers to challenge our aspirations, but instead to focus on the unintended consequences of schooling in the lives of teachers and students in the schools—in short, the moral dilemmas of schooling.

Consider, for example, the following living realities of most schooling:

1. Attendance is compulsory.
2. Children (and teachers even more) are compelled by assignment to live with each other for long periods of time regardless of personal wishes.

¹This article is an interpretation of the content of presented papers and their research implications of a Conference on Moral Dilemmas of Schooling, held at the University of Wisconsin, May 12, 13, 14, 1965. The full proceedings may be published at a later date.

3. Children are compelled to take tests and examinations regardless of pupil or parent desire or approval.

4. Children experience a common compulsory curriculum regardless of individual desires or abilities.

5. Children must read a common established textbook literature.

6. Children experience school regulation of dress, time, social activity, and basic physiological functions.

7. Children are compelled to follow school routines, such as:

a. Remaining inactive for long periods.

b. Listening to someone talk two-thirds of the time.

To interfere to this extent in the lives of others is clearly a moral endeavor. Perhaps all these are *good* things for children to do, yet one must agree that these imperatives and others like them pose moral questions in the schools.

If we are to be satisfied with the moral character of our system of schooling, then we must be assured not only by our good intentions but by the consequences of what we do. The justice or morality of our willingness to dare to influence the lives of children must lie in our willingness to face both the intended and the unintended, both the manifest and the latent, both the hope and the accomplishment of schooling.

It is not enough to hope or intend. The manifest hope of Prohibition was the reduction of alcoholism and its unfortunate effects on our society. The unintended accomplishment of this legislation was the development of a criminal elite that flourished on the profits of illegal liquor. The manifest intention of anti-gambling legislation is to suppress

gambling; the unintended consequence has been the creation of a nation-wide illegal gambling syndicate. The recent experience with thalidomide is a paradigmatic example of good intentions and unforeseen and unsuspected consequences.

A Moral Endeavor

Huebner (5) suggests that there is no single satisfactory way to talk about schooling. We may think and talk about schools with technical or manufacturing language, with political talk, or as instances of moral relationships of men. Each way of talking is neither true nor false, but more or less useful in gaining insight into the ways in which we work and influence each other.

He further suggested that if we are to talk about schools in moral terms we must utilize such concepts as *justice*, *service* and *vitality*. Schooling, if it is to be moral, must: (a) be just in the treatment of ideas and just in the treatment of children in school; (b) serve students rather than compel them to fit into ordained programs; (c) be vital, everchanging, rather than static, bureaucratic, routinized. Huebner argued that our schools are not just, vital or of service to students. The other speakers explored and illuminated specific aspects of this lack of justice, vitality and service. Each speaker illuminated a dilemma and identified a possibility for significant educational research.

Fielder (2) explored the justice with which peoples and ideas were treated in social studies texts, and the service this performs for the learner. He noted an appalling lack of justice in the treatment of oriental Americans in California history, and proposed that books

that distort what has been and is happening in the world are a fundamental disservice to students.

Macdonald (6) discussed the justice and service to students of tests and evaluation procedures in the classroom. He asserted that much of present day evaluation is immoral when used to label, grade and promote students for the purposes of the school system. He pointed out the disservice and injustice tests and evaluation perform in the emotional life of the student, the development of healthy self-images, the restrictiveness of measurement, and in the distorted attitudes they foster about the nature and worth of scholarly or academic study.

Goslin (4) continued in the discussion of testing, focusing upon the moral consequences of predictive testing in the schools. He raised serious questions about the invasion of privacy and the rights of individual pupils and parents. He asserted that there is little evidence to suggest that predictive tests are essential to the conduct of schooling and may well perform injustices and be a disservice to students.

The question of the morality of psychological services for schools was raised by Szasz (7). His contention was essentially this: A responsible psychologist or psychiatrist cannot *serve* both the interests of the individual and the school system. He was fearful that if psychologists or psychiatrists are in the employment of the schools they will serve the bureaucratic interests of the school (e.g., adjusting students to the norms of institutions) rather than serve individuals. In general, he contended that a state institution should not be in the business of arbitrating normality.

The morality of the bureaucratic agents of schools was challenged by Friedenber (3). He reported a study he had conducted in which he found that high school students believed that: (a) they had no right to privacy from school staff; (b) they were not disposed to defend the right of privacy of other students; (c) perceived students as problems to be "helped" and not as persons or individuals; and (d) believed that whatever was done in the name of being helpful by school personnel was morally acceptable. He further supported Szasz's contention that a person cannot serve justly as a "helper" to the student and as an agent of the school. He implied that schools are frustrating and often degrading to individuals and that the mythology of staff "helpfulness" proved to make school life more palatable for the students, as well as to legitimate the coercive behavior of school staff.

The final speaker of the conference, Coleman (1), proposed alternatives to the present lack of justice, service and vitality in the schools. He suggested, briefly, that: (a) each school district establish fundamentally different kinds of schools that children may choose into or out of as they wish; (b) that to facilitate teaching and to reduce the need for marginally competent teachers, we make use of machines whenever they can be intelligently and appropriately used. Coleman discussed essentially the desirability of pluralized, optional, and task coercive (rather than teacher coercive) opportunities in schooling.

It would appear that the speakers above are in complete agreement about the moral dilemma of the individual versus the system. It is further implied

that many of our present practices are in violation of the humanistic tradition and morality of our society, and are in conflict with the preservation of the dignity, worth and integrity of individual students.

If educators are concerned about human values, then it is imperative that we know what moral condition our schools are in. The Conference on Moral Dilemmas of Schooling could well have generated the following kinds of questions for our study and research.

1. What better and/or different ways of talking about schools can be developed to account for moral as well as technical or political concerns?

2. Are textbooks and other commercial materials prepared primarily for markets or for service to students?

3. What attitudes, emotions, and self-images are created in individuals by our evaluation procedures?

4. What are the social consequences of testing?

5. Are bureaucratic practices and procedures (including psychological services) serving the individual?

6. How can we pluralize our school programs and activities to promote service, justice and vitality in the schools?

This is a time when men are looking again at the morality of their relationships. We are witnessing this phenomenon, for example, in the growth of existential literature, the civil rights movement, and the plea for control of nuclear weapons. It seems only too apparent that the moral pain man is experiencing grows out of the total context of his societies and cultures, of which our institutions of schooling are an integral part.

References

The following papers resulted from the Conference on Moral Dilemmas of Schooling, 1965.

1. James Coleman. "Alternatives in Schooling."

2. William R. Fielder. "Education with Averted Eyes."

3. Edgar Friedenberg. "Unintended Consequences of Bureaucratic Schooling."

4. David Goslin. "The Social Consequences of Testing."

5. Dwayne Huebner. "Moral Values and the Curriculum."

6. James Macdonald. "Moral Problems in Classroom Evaluation and Testing."

7. Thomas Szasz. "Mental Health Services in School."

A high school pupil says:

The homework is ridiculous. I spend at least one hour each night outlining my Biology—plus the drawings and diagrams. They are extra. Each teacher expects you to spend at least one hour on his or her subject. If you take four subjects, that makes four hours on homework every night. We are required to outline our Biology book and to take class notes in outline form. We have to turn the notebooks in to the teacher. After we turn them in, the teacher burns them so they won't be given to other students to copy and use next year.

Copyright © 1965 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.