

Overview

RON BRANDT

Character and Critical Thinking

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A growing chorus of educational trendsetters, including Secretary of Education William Bennett, are calling for increased attention by educators to character development. Some specifically reject the moral reasoning that was a feature of such programs in the '70s and focus instead on conduct. More important than simply talking about values, they contend, is that young people should actually follow legitimate rules, for example, and refrain from hurting others or vandalizing property.

Edward Wynne (p. 4), a persistent pioneer in the character education movement, insists that schools can produce more of this kind of behavior by reviving what he calls "the great tradition." In this issue, Wynne asserts that until the 1930s, it was always a central purpose of education to inculcate moral virtue and right conduct—especially the latter. Dismissing cautions raised by his developmentalist critics, Wynne proposes that modern American schools purposely make use of ceremonies, sanctions, and group spirit to promote such traditional values as honesty, loyalty, and unselfishness.

Those who spend their days in schools—and readers of Goodlad's *A Place Called School*—may wonder what the fuss is about. Most educators already embrace traditional values and strive to get students to live in accord with them. Unfortunately, the results are not always as intended. Earlier this fall, the mother of a high school student told me that her son was thrown off the football team when he admitted taking a few trial puffs on a joint of marijuana. Several others who had done the same thing, she said, were not punished because they denied it. In the mother's opinion, the school had succeeded only in making her son doubt the wisdom of telling the truth.

The educator who had made the marijuana decision would undoubtedly agree that the administration of

justice is an inexact science. The story simply illustrates that—in the daily litany of praising and criticizing, joking and scolding, exhorting and punishing—educators necessarily influence the character of their charges. Because they cannot avoid teaching values, they need to think about what values they desire to nurture and in what ways their school rules and customs bolster or erode the values and conduct they seek.

"Character" is an appealing word. It brings to mind images of courageous women and men suffering without complaint in the defense of noble ideals. Unquestionably, educators must do our part to develop such qualities. However, in doing so, we must not neglect teaching critical thinking. People will be better prepared to act in accord with their beliefs if they have considered the alternatives and developed a sound rationale for their positions.

Some parents—and some educators—do not believe that. Rather than encouraging youngsters to examine objectively the arguments for various points of view, they substitute the press for conformity observed by Alan Peshkin (p. 36) at Bethany, a private fundamentalist school.

Of course, parents have the right to restrict their children's exposure to ideas they disagree with, including the right to send their children to private schools that reinforce the parents' values. Public schools, on the other hand, are responsible not only to parents but also to the larger society for the kinds of citizens they produce. Because our society needs people who are both ethical and rational, committed and objective, schools must do more than indoctrinate their students; they must teach them to think for themselves. □



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