

Moral Education in the Life of the School

An ASCD panel urges schools to join with parents, the mass media, and the community to define and teach values such as justice, altruism, diligence, and respect for human dignity.

Photograph by Lloyd Wolf

Moral education is whatever schools do to influence how students think, feel, and act regarding issues of right and wrong. American public schools have a long tradition of concern about moral education, and recently this concern has grown more intense.

Undoubtedly, alarm about the morality of young people is aggravated by a number of forces: fragmentation of the family, decline of trust in public institutions, increasing public concern about questionable ethical practices in business and industry, the impact of the mass media, and our gradually increasing affluence. All of these forces help foster a materialistic, "me first" attitude.

Finally, the increasing ethnic and social diversity of our population, while invigorating our nation, has brought with it an increasing variety of moral values that sometimes conflict. As a result, some educators, awash in a sea of pluralism, are wary of even trying to identify common moral values.

Yet there is increasing protest against the way values are addressed in schools. Public figures such as Secretary of Education William Bennett and New York Governor Mario Cuomo have stated that schools should pay more attention to students' moral development, and their comments have both reflected existing public opinion and triggered renewed interest.

Contemporary Issues

Issues that have confounded moral education over the past century are intensified today: How do we respond



to disagreements about the proper methods of moral education? How does the school balance common values with pluralistic beliefs? What should be the relationship between religion and moral education in the public schools? What is the relationship between private and public morality? Should moral education emphasize indoctrination or reasoning?

How does moral education find a place in a curriculum already stretched to the limit? Should moral education be taught as a separate subject or infused throughout the curriculum? Should moral education take different forms for students of different ages? Who should teach about morality? How does one evaluate moral growth? And, how can schools build support in the community for moral education?

Historical Perspective

In earlier times, American schools did not find such questions troubling. The predecessors of today's public schools were founded under a Massachusetts law passed in 1647, 20 years after the first settlers landed. The law, which warned that "old deluder Satan" flourished on ignorance, was aimed at establishing schools that would deliberately foster morality. The academic learning transmitted in such schools was inextricably bound up with religious doctrine.

Indeed, until the middle of the 19th century, public schools were typically pervaded with a strong, nonsectarian Protestant tone, which was reflected in Bible readings, prayers, ceremonial occasions, and the contents of reading materials. (In some communities where one sect was dominant, a more sectarian tone prevailed.) As Roman Catholic immigration proceeded, conflicts arose over moral and religious education. These disputes were circumvented by the creation of parochial schools.

By the end of the 19th century, public schools increasingly adopted a purely secular form of moral education, often called "character education" (Yulich 1980). The character education movement identified a body of

The Morally Mature Person

What kind of human being do we want to emerge from our efforts at moral education? What are the characteristics of the morally mature person?

A moment's reflection tells us that moral maturity is more than just knowing what is right. The world is full of people who know what is right but set moral considerations aside when they find it expedient to do so. To be moral means to value morality, to take moral obligations seriously. It means to be able to judge what is right but also to care deeply about doing it—and to possess the will, competence, and habits needed to translate moral judgment and feeling into effective moral action.

We submit that the morally mature person has six major characteristics, which are derived from universal moral and democratic principles. These characteristics offer schools and communities a context for discourse about school programs and moral behavior.

The morally mature person habitually:

1. *Respects human dignity*, which includes
 - showing regard for the worth and rights of all persons,
 - avoiding deception and dishonesty,
 - promoting human equality,
 - respecting freedom of conscience,
 - working with people of different views, and
 - refraining from prejudiced actions.
2. *Cares about the welfare of others*, which includes
 - recognizing interdependence among people,
 - caring for one's country,
 - seeking social justice,
 - taking pleasure in helping others, and
 - working to help others reach moral maturity.
3. *Integrates individual interests and social responsibilities*, which includes
 - becoming involved in community life,
 - doing a fair share of community work,
 - displaying self-regarding and other-regarding moral virtues—self-control, diligence, fairness, kindness, honesty, civility—in everyday life,
 - fulfilling commitments, and
 - developing self-esteem through relationships with others.
4. *Demonstrates integrity*, which includes
 - practicing diligence,
 - taking stands for moral principles,
 - displaying moral courage,
 - knowing when to compromise and when to confront, and
 - accepting responsibility for one's choices.
5. *Reflects on moral choices*, which includes
 - recognizing the moral issues involved in a situation,
 - applying moral principles (such as the golden rule) when making moral judgments,
 - thinking about the consequences of decisions, and
 - seeking to be informed about important moral issues in society and the world.
6. *Seeks peaceful resolution of conflict*, which includes
 - striving for the fair resolution of personal and social conflicts,
 - avoiding physical and verbal aggression,
 - listening carefully to others,
 - encouraging others to communicate, and
 - working for peace.

In general, then, the morally mature person understands moral principles and accepts responsibility for applying them.

—ASCD Panel on Moral Education

“Schools cannot ignore moral education; it is one of their most important responsibilities.”

activities and principles by which moral education could be transmitted in a secular institution. The approach emphasized student teamwork, extracurricular activities, student councils, flag salutes and other ceremonies, and commonsense moral virtues like honesty, self-discipline, kindness, and tolerance. Some researchers concluded there was little connection between the character education approach and real-life behavior (Hartshorne and May 1928, 1929, 1930). Later researchers, however, have disputed this conclusion (Rushton 1984); furthermore, the research findings about how other forms of moral education affect conduct are equally inconclusive. In any case, schools still emphasize components of character education, and many of these activities are strongly supported by parents.

While character education was enjoying wide popularity during the first three decades of the century, John Dewey was articulating a theory of moral development that emphasized reflective thinking rather than moral lessons (Dewey 1909, 1916, 1939). According to Dewey, the proper way to resolve moral dilemmas in real life is to apply reason or intelligent thought. This theory of moral development would eventually become the main

theme of the moral education efforts that emerged in the 1960s and thereafter.

In the 1960s, Louis Rath and his colleagues, claiming to follow the work of Dewey, developed the values clarification approach (Raths et al. 1978). While this method was often viewed as a simple set of value-free activities, its original theory intended to help students make value decisions based on careful reasoning and democratic principles. In the 1970s, Lawrence Kohlberg proposed a cognitive-developmental approach to moral education based on the work of Dewey and Piaget (Kohlberg 1976, 1984). Immensely popular in theory but difficult to apply in practice, this approach emphasized the application of thinking skills to the development of moral reasoning based on increasingly complex concepts of justice. In addition, it suggested that such thinking is influenced by the individual's stage of cognitive development and that such thinking fosters movement toward higher stages.

While these two approaches—values clarification and the cognitive-developmental approach—have received widespread attention, others have also been proposed and tried. Among these are the values analysis approach (Fraenkel 1976, 1977), the psychological education program (Mosher and Sprinthall 1970), and several more, including some of the current personal development and self-esteem programs that fall under the rubric of affective education.

It is crucial to understand that no single approach or program has gained complete ascendancy in recent curriculum history. The values clarification and cognitive-developmental approaches have certainly enjoyed great popularity; however, character education has received renewed attention in the past few years, and some public schools even persist in asserting a religious basis for moral education. Also, the revival of classical humanism has again brought forth the notion of moral education through literature and history.

Thus, in 1988, we have a long legacy of theories, approaches, and pro-

grams, and the mixed results of research offer few definitive guidelines. Curricular decisions about moral education are currently based on a mix of moral philosophy and empirical evidence, impelled by public pressure for immediate action by the schools.

Morality and Religion

Religion is a major force in the lives of most Americans. Indeed, international studies continually report a comparatively high level of religious practice among Americans. Because religion is, above all, a meaning system, it naturally speaks to its adherents about right and wrong, good and bad. For many Americans, the first and foremost moral guide is their own religion.

While the theological doctrines of religions differ substantially, there is a great deal of overlap in moral theologues, particularly in their everyday application. Broad areas of consensus exist regarding concern for our fellow human beings, honesty in our dealings with one another, respect for property, and a host of other moral issues. These same issues are fundamental to the rules our nation has chosen to live by; in practice, the dictates of one's religious conscience and the precepts

“Schools should also teach students about the different ultimate sources for morality, including religion.”

of democracy tend to reinforce each other.

There are many Americans, however, in whose lives religion does not play a significant role. There are others who, for a variety of reasons, are antagonistic to religion. For them, moral education based on religion and appeals to religious principles to solve moral issues are serious affronts. On the other hand, some religious people are equally affronted by public schools teaching students to look outside their religious tradition for moral guidance.

Public schools, committed as they are to serving all Americans, must approach this question with understanding, sensitivity, and willingness to compromise. Educators need to be sensitive to students' religious beliefs and respect their legitimacy, yet must not promote such beliefs in the classroom. Teachers should stress the democratic and intellectual bases for morality, but they should also encourage children to bring all their intellectual, cultural, and religious resources to bear on moral issues.

Appreciating the differences in our pluralistic society is fundamental to the success of our democracy. And tolerance must begin in the schools: If we are to survive as a nation, our schools must help us find our common moral ground and help us learn to live together on it.

Moral education is not only inevitable in schools; it is essential. Human beings vary tremendously and are enormously adaptable, and our broad potential requires that we teach the best of our inherited culture. That teaching begins, of course, in our families, but it must be supported by other agencies. A common morality should be developed while a society's future citizens are still children—before misdirected development leads them to harm themselves or others.

To accomplish this important task, all societies have public systems to help develop moral principles in children. In America, schools are a central part of that system. Our schools thus cannot ignore moral education; it is one of their most important responsibilities.

Recommendations

In recent years, the educational community has given substantial attention to excellence in our schools. An emphasis on moral education, we believe, is essential to that end. Moral education is not just another educational fad; it is an old and revered school mission. And with good reason.

At the heart of democracy is the morally mature citizen. A society whose citizens are not morally mature and cannot trust one another resorts to external force and can even evolve into a police state. Similarly, a school whose students are not morally mature is tempted to create an environment of repression. Schools must contribute to the development of morally mature individuals who, in turn, will help to ensure the existence of a just and caring society.

It is in this spirit that we make the following recommendations.

1. We urge all those involved in American education—from school board members to district and building administrators to individual teachers—to renew their commitment to promoting moral education in the schools. Indeed, we urge that moral education be made a powerful unifying and energizing force in the curriculum.

2. We recommend that educators form partnerships with parents, the mass media, the business community, the courts, and civic, racial, ethnic, and religious groups to create a social and cultural context that supports the school's efforts to develop morally mature citizens.

3. We recommend that schools define and teach a morality of justice, altruism, diligence, and respect for human dignity. These are universal moral values that coincide with traditional religious teachings but stand on their own as authentic secular values. As part of a genuine respect for pluralism, schools should also teach students about the different ultimate sources for morality, including religion.

4. We urge schools and school systems to make sure their moral education efforts extend beyond the cognitive domain to include the affective and the behavioral. Moral education must go beyond simply knowing what

“We recommend that schools establish and convey clear expectations for teachers and administrators regarding their roles as moral educators.”

is good; it must also involve prizing what is good and doing what is good.

5. We recommend that moral education include, especially for younger children, socialization into appropriate patterns of conduct and, especially for older students, education for the critical thinking and decision making that are part of adult moral maturity. The latter may include examination of the complex issues that stir ethical debate in society at large.

6. We recommend that educators continually examine the institutional features of school life to ensure that climate and instructional practices contribute to the same moral growth.

7. We urge further research on what works in moral education, drawing on research findings from other fields and presenting those findings to the profession forcefully and clearly.

8. We recommend that educators regularly assess the moral climate of schools and the conduct of students and communicate the results of these assessments to their communities. Many schools take steps now, including notations about conduct on pupils' report cards, notes of praise or criticism to parents, and recognition for individuals or groups whose conduct is praiseworthy. We acknowledge,

Members of the ASCD Panel on Moral Education

- Kevin Ryan* (Chair), Professor of Education, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.
James A. Beane, Professor of Education, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, New York.
Marilyn Braveman, Director of Education, American Jewish Committee, New York, New York.
Barbara T. Jackson, Assistant Superintendent, District of Columbia Public Schools, Washington, D.C.
Merrill Harmin, Professor, School of Education, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, Illinois.
James Leming, Professor, School of Education, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois.
Thomas Lickona, Professor of Education, State University of New York, Cortland, New York.
Edward A. Wynne, Professor, College of Education, University of Illinois, Chicago, Illinois.
Diane G. Berreth (Project Director), Director of Field Services, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia.
Alan Lockwood (Reviewer), Professor, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
Sally Banks Zakariya (Project Editor), Senior Editor, *The American School Board Journal*, Alexandria, Virginia.

This statement does not necessarily reflect the official positions of the organizations represented by the panel members.

"The moral education we call for is part of the living legacy of our nation."

however, that there is still much work to be done in the articulation of moral principles and the development of methods to assess their place in the school.

9. We recommend that schools establish and convey clear expectations for teachers and administrators regarding their roles as moral educators. Furthermore, we recommend that their performance as moral educators be included as a regular and important part of their evaluation.

10. We recommend that teacher educators, both preservice and inservice, give major attention to moral education to ensure that teachers have the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills to fulfill their moral education responsibilities.

In these recommendations, and in our report as a whole, we do not call for schools simply to return to the attitudes and traditions of the past; nor do we urge schools to attempt a new educational experiment. Rather, the moral education we call for is part of the living legacy of our nation. It is at the center of our evolving tradition as a national community. Our vision of the moral education children need is

one that is basic to the survival of our culture, building on the past while preparing young people to deal with the moral challenges of the future. □

References

- Dewey, John. *Moral Principles in Education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909.
- Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916.
- Dewey, John. *Theory of Valuation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939.
- Fraenkel, Jack R. "Teaching About Values." In *Values of the American Heritage: Case Studies and Teaching Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1976.
- Fraenkel, Jack R. *How to Teach About Values*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977.
- Hartshorne, Hugh, and Mark A. May. *Studies in Deceit*. New York: Macmillan, 1928.
- Hartshorne, Hugh, and Mark A. May. *Studies in Service and Control*. New York: Macmillan, 1929.
- Hartshorne, Hugh, and Mark A. May. *Studies in the Nature of Character*. New York: Macmillan, 1930.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. "Moral Stages and Moralization: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach." In *Moral Development and Behavior*, edited by T. Lickona. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. *The Psychology of Moral Development*. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.
- Mosher, Ralph, and Norman Sprinthal. "Psychological Education in Secondary School: A Program to Promote Individual and Human Development." *American Psychologist* 25 (1970): 911-924.
- Raths, Louis, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney Simon. *Values and Teaching*. 2nd ed. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1978.
- Rushton, Phillip. "The Altruistic Personality." In *Development and Maintenance of Pro-Social Behavior*, edited by Ervin Staub. New York: Plenum, 1984.
- Yulish, S.M. *The Search for a Civic Religion*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980.

This statement is excerpted from *Moral Education in the Life of the School*, a new ASCD publication prepared by the ASCD Panel on Moral Education, Kevin Ryan, chair. The full report, which is not a comprehensive member publication, is available for \$6 from ASCD. (Stock no. 611-88038. Orders under \$20 must be accompanied by payment.)

Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.