



1-1-1983

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#### Recommended Citation

Dettmer, Peggy A. (1983) "Moral education in public schools: Some realities, problems and suggestions for educators," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 10: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1766>

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The debate about moral education in public schools continues

# Moral education in public schools: Some realities, problems and suggestions for educators

by Peggy A. Dettmer

Teaching is not the cushioned profession that many censorious writers and speakers would have everyone believe. Never mind the more obvious negatives such as low pay, fear for one's own safety, diminished esteem of the profession and lowered group morale. Within the current "blame the teacher" *Zeitgeist* lurk other pressures which include, but are not limited to, a growing rift between school boards and teachers, the back-to-basics movement, demands for teacher competency testing, and even the issue of whether and how to educate public school students in ways which will encourage moral growth.

The demand for moral education in schools is not new. Concern about the efficacy of conducting planned moral education for school children has probably existed since the onset of compulsory education. At the beginning of this century John Dewey (1909) professed moral education to be central to the school's mission. His

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thinking on this subject became a springboard for various philosophies and subsequent methodologies designed to instill morality in the young (Perine, 1978). Twenty years later, Hartshorne and May (1930) reported on the ineffectiveness of character education in their time. Another 35 years later, Jean Piaget (1965) was recommending strategies to enhance children's moral judgment. During the past two decades Lawrence Kohlberg (1971) has researched and developed techniques for promoting moral development in the classroom through cognitive stimulation induced by moral dilemma discussions.

Discussion about the role of public schools in providing moral education is not limited to educational theorists and researchers. The sociological movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s demonstrate an increasing public polarization over the issue of moral education. It is evident that this is one of the most intense debates taking place in public education.

On the one hand, there is evidence that parents and churches, the two societal groups traditionally entrusted with moral development, are not succeeding as well as some factions would like. Many people are alarmed by what is seen as a decreasing level of moral behavior and indicate a readiness to share the task with other social institutions such as the public schools. For example, in the 13th Gallup Poll (Phi Delta Kappan, 1981) on public attitudes toward schools, 70 percent of parents surveyed favored instruction in values and ethical behavior as part of the public school curriculum. This strong majority support was found to exist in all population segments and in all regions of the country.

On the other hand, there are several increasingly vocal groups who decry what they perceive to be the moral education currently occurring in public schools. Groups such as the Moral Majority and others often labeled "fundamentalists" and "creationists" oppose with fervor the so-called "secular humanism" and "moral relativity" they see in contemporary curricular programs, instructional methodologies and learning materials. These factions believe appropriate and effective moral education can not take place in the public schools as they are presently operated.

In reality, these groups want moral development to be addressed systematically in public education. What they are arguing for, however, is a specific content different from the values system they believe is propounded currently. For example, parent and citizen groups in opposition to "secular humanism" are requesting state boards of education as well as local boards to clarify the extent to which individual growth and development activities will include sociological, psychological, values clarification and/or other humanistic education for children. Creationists demand at least a balanced treatment in the classroom for both "creation science" and "evolution science." Fundamentalists who believe America is not the Christian nation they think it should be are accusing those they call "humanists" of taking over the media and all of public education.

At the same time, back-to-basics activists are taking their children out of public classrooms to enroll them in parochial and other private schools which they believe will demand orderly behavior and mastery of basic skills and instill basic principles of virtue. Newspaper headlines declare "Parents call two classics garbage, urge they be banned." The federal government becomes involved with court cases concerning "creationism" and censorship, as

well as with legislation such as the Hatch Amendment. This federal law, while still relatively unknown to many parents and educators several years after its passage, states that psychological or psychiatric testing or examination of student attitudes and beliefs in certain areas cannot be administered to minors without prior written parental consent.

Thus the debate about moral education in public schools continues. However, if recent court cases and the Hatch Amendment are indicators, steps toward the resolution of the debate are being taken by others outside professional education. If we are to be more than the powerless vortex around which the issues swirl, we must do more than be aware of the controversy and pressures created for us. We must understand also the role currently played by public schools in moral development and the responsibilities we have to influence the outcome of the debate. What follows is a brief discussion of three essential realities concerning the question of moral education in the public schools. Also included are analyses of some problems these realities create for public educators and suggestions for action so that our roles might be more constructive.

### **Reality 1: Moral Education is a Fundamental Societal Function of American Public Education**

Some educators, upon finding themselves in the middle of the debate over moral education, are asking: "Why should schools now take on this added responsibility? Why should we have to spread our already limited time and resources even further to cover this additional curriculum?"

These questions are understandable to anyone who is even mildly aware of the harried and pressed position in which today's educators find themselves. It must be pointed out, however, that these questions also reflect a myopic view of the history of public education in this country and the role of organized education in any society. The impulse for some kind of morality exists in all human communities, and each has a dominant value system which is taught to the young as part of their acculturation and socialization.

In societies with organized educational systems, the responsibility for moral education falls largely to the schools. This is particularly true in the specific case of American public education. Though critics of our system might take the point much further, few of any persuasion would argue that one of the fundamental reasons behind compulsory public education in this country has been to help insure new generations' understanding and appreciation of basic American values. Our democratic way of life still depends upon the public schools to instill and maintain a national consensus concerning basic societal values necessary for its continuance. Thus, whether we like it or not, moral education is a fundamental function of American public education.

One basic problem created by this reality concerns the nature of our contemporary society. We are a pluralistic people. In seeing the differences contributed by various groups as adding strength to the whole, we have come to prize diversity. As a society we are now faced with the reality that a major element of that diversity has to do with values. Morality and values are communally based and subjective. There is scarcely any human behavior judged immoral by one group of people which might not

be acceptable to another group. Consider, for example, values that concern eating human flesh, setting defective newborns out to die or letting old people starve who are no longer considered assets to the community. Then, too, there are the values regarding the whipping of children, drinking tea or coffee, charging interest on money loaned and saluting the country's flag. Finally, there are more enigmatic behaviors such as fasting, penance, self-denial, flagellation, silence, solitude and celibacy. It should be clear that no absolute standard of moral behavior exists today. Therefore, a constructive approach would seem to be to formulate a workable, pluralistic definition of morality which could be applied effectively to the group-life situation of schools and communities. Morality could be defined as:

that set of ideas about right and wrong within a society's customs that regulates relationships and modes of behavior to enhance the survival and well-being of the entire group.

If we embark along this road, we must recognize that students' cognitive and affective horizons must be expanded beyond the boundaries of their own immediate surroundings to include the larger environment beyond school walls, their own communities, and even their own national borders. Schools will have to accept the responsibility for teaching about such things as global interdependence. Furthermore, we need to recognize that if we commit to a systematic, planned program of moral education based on the above definition, other changes will be necessary. For example, Kohlberg maintains that schools are not especially moral as they are now arranged. He posits that the school atmosphere is generally a combination of a "punishment stage" and a "law and order stage" which creates an authority-based pattern of behavior. Thus students are told what to think rather than helped to discover how to think and form independent judgments for right and wrong that will allow them to take their places in an interdependent world. To change this situation, we as educators must be willing to examine ourselves and modify our teaching.

### **Reality 2: Moral education is as basic as reading, writing and arithmetic**

Some voices in the debate about moral education in the public schools argue that schools cannot teach the "basics" and so they believe that schools should not be entrusted with the complex task of moral development. Obviously, if moral education is a primary societal function of schools, then it is a basic and should be considered as important as the other basic skills. What could be more fundamental than group survival and progressive development of our communities and nation? How can such development be assured without the stability and continuity provided by common national agreement upon moral precepts shared across generations and geography?

The problem created by the importance of moral education as a basic element of schooling is not so much whether schools should systematically plan and implement programs of moral education, but rather, what specifically should those programs contain. What is worth preserving? Within the basis of moral education, what is really basic? These questions about content provide the focus for the moral education controversy which has been intensifying during the last several years. Given extremes such as the "creationists" who do not want evolution em-

phasized and the "civil libertarians" who are against any restrictions of curricular content, how do we as educators know what to teach?

It seems necessary here to differentiate between moral education and moral indoctrination. The latter concentrates on content while the former is essentially a process. The latter assumes that those in control know what is right/best/appropriate for all, and the former exemplifies a faith that individuals who possess good thinking skills can make decisions about right and wrong for themselves. Planned moral development in schools would include building those important skills within the cognitive domain such as the abilities to analyze antecedents and consequents, to generate alternatives and to evaluate possible solutions. Can we give the next generation anything less than these skills when we know how rapidly the world is changing and how different the conditions of their adult world are likely to be from those of ours?

### **Reality 3: Moral education occurs every day in every classroom**

Strangely perhaps, conscientious teachers and some critics of contemporary education agree on one point. Both question the ability of teachers to assume responsibility for the moral development of children other than their own. The teachers point out that they were not trained to be instructors of morality; and understandably, they hesitate to tread into such a sensitive and controversial area. The critics note that there is no guarantee assuring teachers are morally superior to any other group in society. Thus they question the qualifications of teachers for instilling moral development.

Though the question of teacher capacity seems to be an important issue, it is one which must be relegated at this time to the realm of "academic debate." The reality, if we choose to confront it, is that moral education "comes with the territory" for anyone working with young people, particularly in explicitly defined learning situations such as public school classrooms. Teachers tell children what to do and make evaluations of their work and behavior. They monitor social relations within the schools, and they reward and punish students for a variety of things. They cite certain youngsters as character models to be emulated by the others. Even bulletin boards and worksheets mirror values of teachers and curriculum designers who may or may not be aware of their power of influence in the moral domain. If teaching behavior were monitored and recorded by an impartial observer, most teachers would be shocked at the frequency of their perhaps implicit but ever powerful moralizing. Thus, the school and the classroom provide a natural and unavoidable daily environment for the shaping of children's values in ways which can be both extremely explicit and intended and terribly subtle and unconscious.

The research indicates that the power teachers have is not limited to the communication of general values and expectations. Children's basic judgmental responses are modifiable also through adult cues. Bandura and Walters (1969) found that a child's acquisition of adult moral standards is the gradual process of imitating observable values and behaviors of others to a considerable extent. Modeling emerged in the Cowan study (1969) as a significant determinant of moral judgment regardless of the direction in which the behavior was being modified. These findings are particularly important for the adolescent who is beginning to look less to parents as paradigms and

more to other adults as identifying figures. Teachers are certainly among those significant adults who can and do serve as vital models for children's developing moral sense.

Thus, whether it is good or not, whether we like it or not, all teachers are instructors of morality, and moral education occurs every day in every classroom. One problem this reality creates for educators is an issue of awareness; another is an issue of personal commitment.

First, do we really understand the role and influence we have in the moral development of students? Are we aware of what specific values we are modeling and communicating with the myriad of actions we take each day in our classrooms? And second, do we want the responsibility? Can we be confident that students are receiving the "right" messages from us? How might we change our behaviors to improve the moral education provided by our presence? And how much time, energy and personal involvement are we willing to commit to the effort? To begin to answer these and other questions, we must be aware of several things.

We need to know one major requisite of encouraging moral growth lies in its demonstration, i.e. the modeling of appropriate behavior such as the cognitive skills noted earlier. Teachers model appropriately for students by being willing to learn, to listen and to change positions on an issue as more information is gained, but not by reacting to annoying behavior with emotional heat while preaching tolerance and understanding. Students grow when they model teachers who exhibit a clear consistency between their rhetoric and their behavior and who seem to know where they are going to derive satisfaction from their lives. Students are particularly responsive to those teachers who are genuinely interested in them and their ideas, who can be reached because they listen and appropriately question, who avoid preaching, and who demonstrate patience without exhibiting sarcasm and authoritarianism. Teachers need to be aware that some students have attained a personal level of moral development above that of their age peer group. They can suffer greatly from what may be termed an invalidation of their perceptions. Thus, they in particular need teachers as models and facilitators to accept their perceptions and to help them build upon and refine them. We need to know all these things as we decide about our individual roles as instructors or morality, and we need to remember that as long as we are teachers, we are in this role. The only question is whether or not we choose to approach it in a planned and thoughtful manner.

The essence of planned moral education in schools should be for the teacher to create opportunities for students to organize their own experiences in ever more complex ways and then internalize the material so they can pursue further development after formal education is over. There have been many strategies designed to aid teachers in stimulating moral development in systematic ways. These include role playing, peer counseling, learning of ethical philosophy, tutoring, interviewing, direct instruction, disciplining, values clarification, study of logic and generally the provision of a warm, understanding and supportive atmosphere. Some attempts have been made also to outline particular vehicles for moral education within specific subject matter areas.

For instance, arts and sciences can be utilized to develop a stage and level of aesthetic comprehension, expression and judgment. Appropriate use of materials for

learning might include literary works, newspapers, biographies and famous credos and maxims. Certain contemporary cartoons may be used to promote moral development. Because principled morality is enhanced by the capacity to take another's role and understand another's perspective, the study of biography can provide students with vicarious modeling of values. Biography and other literature nonthreatening vehicles for encouraging development of moral values while at the same time attending to basic skills of reading.

Social studies are also a rich source of possibilities for promoting moral growth. There are issues to discuss, historical decisions to analyze, questions to ask and ideas to probe, all stemming from the real world. Therefore they are accepted more readily by students as personally relevant. Newspapers can become texts for moral issues as well as current events.

Science and math contribute toward stimulation of principled thought and abstract reasoning. Problem-solving, the study of logic and reasoning about ethical issues within science, provides appropriate exercises for encouraging moral growth. Science and math can enhance moral development through the use of inquiry, investigation, formulation of principles and analysis with careful articulation of possible solutions.

All of these methods and strategies can be defended as appropriate learning materials for the generally acknowledged basics while providing opportunity for moral growth. The key to success with such materials is to know them thoroughly. Then the teacher should study not one, but several highly recommended books on theory of moral development and application of moral education. Materials then can be selected which provide opportunities to develop moral growth in nonthreatening ways. The basic principle underlying effective use of strategies in sensitive areas is that teachers must be learners themselves, never stopping in their search for new evidence and ideas.

All in all, moral education has an ominous sound and the current controversies surrounding it seem threatening to educators until the essentials are reexamined:

- Schools are value-laden institutions with societal functions relating directly to the survival and progress of our nation.
- All teachers are engaged in moral education even as they wonder if they are doing it right.
- Moral education must continue if we as educators are to fulfill our responsibilities to the next generation and thereby to our society.

With the current interest in moral education and the diminishing influence of church, parents and traditions, we as educators may feel compelled—but also have the opportunity—to structure some deliberate moral education within our schools and educational system.

Scratch a critic of moral education, and it is likely that underneath is someone who just wants to do things his or her way. However, if a learning climate is created in which students find the courage to be imperfect, learn how to correct mistakes, develop reasoning powers and practice principled behavior, those teachers will be performing that essential part of their responsibility which does indeed "come with the territory."

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