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Moral Dimensions of Educational Decisions

The essential place of values-rich curricula in the public schools

By Amitai Etzioni

There is a widely held notion that public schools (which, of course, most students attend) should not teach values. In effect, schools do. Moreover, there are next to no significant decisions a school administrator or classroom teacher can make that do not have a normative dimension.

The values at issue are not merely, or even firstly, those sometimes read over the public address system at the start of the school day or the six pillars that Michael Josephson of the Josephson Institute, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit promoting ethical decision making, has advocated as the foundations of virtue: trust, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship.

The values at issue are not all or even mainly these personal virtues but rather social ones — for instance, dealing with all people as if they are of equal value; not discriminating on ethnic, racial or sexual orientation grounds; solving differences in peaceful ways; and respecting the environment.

Conformist Curricula

The role of values in decision making is most obvious in formulating the curriculum. Schools are under considerable pressure from the community to focus on academics, which in effect means serving the utilitarian, economic futures of pupils. Parents, school boards and news media that push for higher academic achievements are not seeking to turn the students into scholars but to equip them to compete in the marketplace (and in the competitive college admissions arena) by teaching them math, writing skills (memos, not poetry), foreign languages and



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so on.

In contrast, schools are, and ought to be, concerned with human and social development, ensuring graduates are able to work out differences with others verbally and nonabusively; to walk in the other person's shoes; to resist temptations to act in unethical ways; and to care about higher purposes than self. Many curriculum decisions reflect the balance those who run schools and education systems strike between these two competing set of values, the academic and the social.

We are all aware of dramatic confrontations about which books to choose and in which ways to frame a particular teaching outline for a class to follow — for instance, the debate between those who would use a standard biology textbook to teach evolution and those who would use books like *Of Pandas and People: The Central Question of Biological Origins*, which teach intelligent design.

However, we do not always keep in mind that all selections of books and other materials to be used in teaching students reflect a choice of values. Take, for instance, the Civil War. It can be taught as a grand struggle for liberty and equality; as a political strategy for keeping the union together; as a tragic failure to resolve differences without mass killing and enormous suffering; or something else. Whatever we choose reflects our values and helps transmit them to the students.

Education decision makers are understandably reluctant to view these issues as involving normative choices because framing the decisions in this way forces the question: Whose values are going to be taught? Instead, decisions often are deliberated and made on other grounds, such as "this textbook is highly recommended by ..." Furthermore, modifications to curricula are made in terms of "we need to give more room to ..." rather than openly reviewing the normative implications that all books, narratives, songs, plays and course outlines have.

In addition, a notion exists that normative education ought to take place at home or in a community's places of worship, not in public school classrooms. Actually, these important sources of character formation never suffice and normative education in schools cannot be avoided as there are no educational materials that are normatively neutral and no methods of teaching that have no moral implications — including the moral relativism communicated by vain efforts to be neutral.

One should note that (a) there is a considerable normative consensus, for instance, in favor of environmental protection and an active and informed citizenry, against racial and gender discrimination, and for peaceful resolution of differences, among quite a few other social moral values; and (b) schools best focus on developing two essential behavioral or character traits that lie at the foundation of all normative education: self-discipline and empathy.

Proper character development entails first and foremost acquiring the capacity to control one's impulses and to mobilize oneself for acts other than the satisfaction of biological needs and immediate desires. Workers need such self-control so they can stick to their tasks and adhere to a work routine that is often not very satisfying by itself. Citizens and community members need self-control so they will not demand ever-more services while being unwilling to pay taxes and make contributions to the common good. And self-control makes people more tolerant of those from different ethnic, racial and political backgrounds.

When we look at the violent ways people in other countries (and our nation in the past) deal with personal differences, we realize the importance of instilling in each new generation of youngsters the capacity to hold impulses in check. (Impulse control is even more essential for a democratic society than the often-cited prerequisites of being politically informed and voting regularly. The only reason we can focus on these features of democracy is that we implicitly assume that character formation is well attended to.)

Disciplinary Lessons

How do we educate for character? Parents and educators often stress the importance of discipline in character formation. In several public opinion surveys, school administrators and parents rank a lack of discipline as the No. 1 problem in our schools. They correctly perceive that in a classroom where students are disorderly and disrespectful, where rules and routines cannot be developed and maintained, learning is not possible.

Unfortunately, discipline as many people understand it takes on an authoritarian meaning. A well-disciplined environment often is considered one in which teachers and principals “lay down the law” and brook no talking back from students, and where students show respect by rising when a teacher enters the room and speak only when spoken to. Some, have even suggested schools ought to re-examine the use of corporal punishment for this purpose. Indeed, in a few states physical punishment is still considered an effective way to maintain discipline. Moreover, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand a Texas law that authorizes the use of corporal punishment, short of deadly force.

If discipline is achieved by such authoritarian means, youngsters will behave as long as they are closely supervised and fear punishment. But as soon as the authorities turn their backs, such young people are likely to misbehave. Moreover, their resentment at being coerced is likely to express itself in some form of antisocial behavior. This is because the discipline is linked to punishment rather than to a commitment to doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong.

What the pupil — and the future adult — requires is self-discipline, the inner ability to mobilize and commit to a task he or she believes in and to feel positive — that is, self-rewarded — for having done so.

Internalization of values occurs in structured environments, but not under authoritarian conditions. Close, continuous, external supervision and punitive environments are counterproductive. What is required is a school structure made up of people, rules and organization of tasks that motivate students by providing clear guidelines. These must be both firmly upheld and be reasonable and justified, so students can understand and accept the need to abide by them.

Character formation lays the psychic foundation for one to mobilize to a task **and** to behave morally by being able to control impulses and defer gratification. However, character formation per se does not educate one to specific virtues or values; it is without specific moral content. It provides the rectitude to tell the truth even if the consequences are unpleasant, but it does not teach the value of being truthful. It enables a person to refrain from imposing his or her sexual impulse on an unwilling partner, but it does not teach him or her that it is morally unacceptable to rape.

Trying to develop character without attention to sharing of values with the young is like trying

to develop muscles of an athlete without having a particular sport in mind. It follows that if those who are being educated are to become committed to moral values, youngsters must acquire not only the capacity to commit — the psychological muscle that moral conduct requires — but also the values that direct the exercise, the application of moral capacity. To the extent that the family no longer provides the values, the community turns to schools to teach the young to tell right from wrong.

Value of Experiences

How do we build up moral commitments? There is one way that far surpasses all others. The most important social science observation here is that experiences are more effective teachers than lectures. This is particularly evident in extracurricular activities, especially sports. True, these can be abused, such as when coaches focus on winning as the only object and neglect to instill learning to play by the rules, teamwork and camaraderie. However, if coaches and the messages they impart are well-integrated into the values education of a school and if parents see the importance of using sports to educate rather than to win, sports can be a most effective way to enhance values education.

Why are extracurricular activities credited with such extraordinary power? Because they generate experiences that are powerful educational tools. Thus, if one team plays as a bunch of individuals and loses because its adversary played as a well-functioning team, the losing players learn — in a way that no pep talk or slide show can teach — the merit of playing as a team.

The same holds for other activities that take their place at school. Thus, the first step toward enhancing the moral educational role of schools is to increase the awareness and analysis of the school as a set of experiences.

School should be seen not as a collection of teachers, pupils, classrooms and curricula. Instead, examine the parking lots. Are they places in which wild driving takes place and school authorities are not to be seen, or are they places where one learns respect for others' safety, regulated either by faculty or by fellow students? Are the cafeterias places where students pelt each other with food and the noise is overwhelming, or are they civilized places where students can conduct meaningful conversations over lunch? Are the corridors areas where muscles and social status are required to avoid being pushed aside by bullies, or are they safe conduits patrolled by faculty or students? Is vandalism held in check and when it does occur, is the damage corrected by the offending students? Are students treated according to reasonable and understandable criteria?

In some public schools in large cities, the dominant education issue is maintaining law and order, which is a minimal condition for creating experiences that may build morality. If students are armed with guns, sell drugs and harass teachers, these issues command urgent attention that must be accorded before one can turn to the more subtle points of moral education.

In many other schools, including in suburbia, an extreme form of progressiveness hinders moral education. Here students are often treated as if they are adults with formed judgments and unbounded rights rather than young persons whose development needs to be nurtured. In these places, activities and rules are fashioned to please the students rather than to cultivate and enrich them. Grades are dished out to make students feel better about themselves and boost their self-esteem rather than to prod them to grow. Homework, which can be a good tool to build self-discipline because it must be done without close supervision, is curtailed so as to

avoid "overburdening" students.

Rotation and Bonding

For teachers to be more than purveyors of information and be able to educate, they must be able to bond more closely with students than they do now in many schools. This bonding may be encouraged by arranging for less rotation of pupils. Many American high schools are organized today as if a powerful sociological engineer were intent on minimizing bonds between students and teachers and seeking to ensure whatever peer bonds formed would not be classroom-related.

These effects stem from the fact students are reshuffled every time the bell rings, while the various subject teachers stay put. As a consequence, students, especially in larger schools, rarely develop bonds as members of a class group because the class members who come together in one period do not remain together in the next. As a result, peer groups, which often hold much sway over members, especially in moral matters, are not classroom-based and are formed for other activities, whether it is racing cars or heavy-metal rock music. Although these peer groups don't necessarily have to oppose community or education values, sociological studies show they often do. They are rarely mobilized by educators on the side of moral education in typical high-rotation high schools.

Another result is that teachers cannot form bonds with their students because they have few opportunities to get to know them. Teachers are typically responsible for a subject and not for a "class" — not for a given group of pupils, say, all those in the 11th grade, third section. Thus the highly specialized school organization is, in effect, a systematic hindrance to bonding with educators, which is an essential prerequisite for moral education.

High schools should be reorganized to facilitate experience-based moral education. Teachers should be in charge of a particular class, teaching the same group of youngsters, say, three subjects (especially those rich in value content such as history and literature) or two subjects and civics.

The same teacher would be the class' homeroom teacher, in charge of disciplinary matters. Discipline should be appropriated by the teacher not as if he or she were a punitive police officer, but as a faculty member whose task it is to use instances of improper conduct to engage in moral education. Schools might also institute a policy whereby such teachers would follow the same students from 9th through 12th grades.

Such changes, in turn, would necessitate modifications in the ways the teachers themselves are trained, to make them less specialized. Note, though, many teachers, especially those who teach humanities or liberal arts, already are properly trained. In any event, without more bonding and contacts that are more encompassing, extensive and value-rich, moral education is unlikely to succeed.

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