

# Academic Instructors or Moral Guides? Moral Education in America and the Teacher's Dilemma

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**Abstract:** In this article, the author examines the role that teachers play in the moral development of American students. Historically, one of public education's purposes in America has been the development of moral citizens. However, educators currently face more academic accountability due to No Child Left Behind. Consequently, teachers must strike a balance between achieving quantifiable academic standards and assisting with students' character development.

**Keywords:** character education, moral education, secondary education

Occasionally, a student asks me to write a letter of recommendation or fill out a recommendation form for college. When complying with these requests, I often find that the application requires me to address the issue of the applicant's character or integrity. Most of the time, I know the student well enough, I think, to at least make an educated guess regarding this aspect of him or her. Yet, because I work with approximately one hundred students each term, I rarely feel that I know the candidate that well. Furthermore, although I can attest to a student's academic performance ("She's a dedicated student, a pleasure to teach!") and abilities ("His writing sparkles!"), I generally do not feel as well prepared to make similar judgments about his or her moral character. After all, I teach English; the students' grades depend largely on their acumen as readers, writers, thinkers, and test takers. Unless I have witnessed a memorable act of student dishonesty or cruelty, I have no basis to assume that any of my students possess less than admirable moral character. My assessments

involve literature and rhetoric more than they do morals and ethics.

Of course, as an English teacher, I often delve into the topic of moral and ethical behavior as the class explores characters and conflicts in their reading. We talk about the dilemmas that John Proctor faces in *The Crucible* and the actions of *The Return of the Native's* Eustacia Vye. We debate societal issues such as euthanasia and, when I am feeling brave, abortion or gay marriage. I have taught some classes in which I felt that a brief overview of ethical philosophies was prudent. I generally start these discussions with a series of hypothetical situations such as the following:

Your friend, Suzy, comes from a disadvantaged family. Her father died a couple of years ago, and her mother is a verbally abusive alcoholic. Money is scarce. Between classes one day, you see Suzy at her locker, crying. On investigation, you find that she has lost ten dollars that her mother gave her to buy a coupon book (a school fundraising item) for the family. After talking to her, you walk toward your next class. Along the way, you see Eddie, the school bully, walking toward his next class. You slow down, hoping he will not see you, but he does and he "accidentally" bumps into you. "Excuse me!" he chuckles as you struggle to maintain your balance. As he walks into his classroom, you notice a twenty-dollar bill fall out of his book bag. He has not noticed and neither has anyone else. The bill lies on the floor in front of you. What do you do?

After the kids think about their responses individually, I place them into groups that I have strategically chosen, hoping to generate maximum disagreement. After the groups share their thoughts with the class, I

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use their feedback to initiate my exposition of ethical and moral theories. I am careful not to espouse one student's viewpoint over another's, preferring to play devil's advocate with every viewpoint.

Over the years, I have heard many students express views that show little regard for ethical behavior. Obviously, a dilemma such as the previous one challenges the students who seek to do the right thing. However, those students do not usually compose the majority of the class. Considering the number of students in my school who belong to churches and youth groups, this surprises me. In fact, during one discussion of chivalry in conjunction with medieval British literature, I asked about whether honor still mattered in today's society. One student summed up the general feeling in the class when he claimed that people negotiate what is right or wrong to get what they need or want. Earlier in the term, the students in this class had discussed heroes in small groups. When one student challenged another's choice of hero because he had an extramarital affair, the other student retorted, "So? Everyone cheats on their wife."

Granted, the views of these students do not speak universally for every student in every classroom in America. But the existence of these attitudes leads me to ponder another hypothetical:

You are a high school English teacher. The quality of your work is measured by your students' performance on county and state standardized tests. Do you spend time on character or moral education? Or do you, in the words of a colleague, "imagine that your students all go home after school, read the Bible, drink milk, and go to bed before ten o'clock"?

According to curricular guidelines, the answer appears to be, "No, you do not teach morality." After all, how does a teacher measure morality? And in a culturally pluralistic society, why would a teacher want to take the chance of forcing his or her views on a captive audience?

Yet, all schools (and societies, for that matter) must have rules for behavior. Freedom cannot be absolute; no one wants chaos. So, even if we do not teach morals, we expect moral behavior. Historically, the key question has been, "How?" How do we generate moral behavior? Perhaps in fear of spewing unwanted religious or philosophical dogma, public schools in America eschew a cognitive approach. Instead, schools take a behaviorist approach, and students learn to act in fear of punishment while hoping for reward.

This reality is the result of an education system that serves a changing population with ever-evolving needs. To best appreciate this phenomenon, we need to consider significant developments in the history of education in America in light of moral education. Then, we must look at the current state of moral education in America.

## A History of Moral Education in America

### *Pre-1800: Religious Morality*

The relative emphasis on morals has varied throughout the history of American education, shifting in importance with changes in our perception of what schools should do. In colonial America, educators primarily trained children to act morally and in the confines of religious expectations. Although the goals of schooling gradually evolved from acculturation to producing economically viable students and to training students who could compete in a global economic market, the amount of attention paid to moral education has lessened. The only real constant, in terms of moral education, has been an insistence on a behaviorist approach. Simply put, when it comes to moral values, American policymakers primarily want students to act appropriately, whether they have internalized a real sense of moral virtue or not.

The early history of American education repeatedly tells the story of schools attempting to instill (or force, in some populations) in students a set of values. For example, colonial schools primarily taught the Christian values that the larger adult population promoted (Lickona 1993; Mulkey 1997). One need look no further than the formation of *town schools* in seventeenth century Massachusetts under the "Old Deluder Satan Act" to discover the early reasoning behind schooling (Urban and Wagoner 2004). Religious-based education in the New World so strongly marked the preferences of the time that it survived schools inspired by Enlightenment thinkers (most notably, Benjamin Franklin) who advocated a curriculum aimed at producing practical thinkers (Urban and Wagoner).

### *The Nineteenth Century: American Protestant Values*

In the infancy of the American nation, with Constitutional emphasis on separate church and state, educators departed from a strictly religious view of morality. Instead, the focus shifted to secular notions of virtue that acculturated newcomers to the country. By the 1830s, a steadily growing immigrant population flooded America. Educational policy responded with a curriculum heavy in American values, especially those needed for factory workers (e.g., promptness, respect, and dependability). Aiding this cause were the McGuffey Readers, which focused on the values of the country's earliest patriots, especially George Washington (Ingall 2002). In these stories, we see what Mosier (ctd. in Ingall) deemed a merge between "Christian and middle class ideas" (123).

This idea progressed during Horace Mann's lifetime. Mann, of course, was instrumental in the formation of the *common schools* that passed along broad, Protestant values to a new generation of Americans, including the children of increasingly larger numbers of immigrants.

Although teaching religious doctrine was not the main goal of these schools, religion was clearly the basis for the values they sought to instill. This continued into the 1870s, when taxation began to completely support schools and new laws took the Bible out of the classroom (Urban and Wagoner 2004).

We see in this early history of American education the power of the schools to teach students values not solely for the betterment of the individual, but more important, for the stability of the society. Just as willing immigrants were taught the values of their new homeland, so too did Native Americans and black slaves experience indoctrination. Even before *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the education of blacks in this country had been a muddled subject. Although slaveholders in the early nineteenth century allowed their slaves to attend Sunday school (after all, the promise of freedom in heaven could make the harshness of captivity more endurable), allowing these men and women too much education risked creating a population full of dangerous ideas concerning freedom and natural rights. The worst fears of the masters came to fruition with the Turner Rebellion of 1831 and, subsequently, Sunday schools were off-limits to the slave population (Urban and Wagoner 2004).

The slave population did, however, provide an opportunity for a renaissance of religious-based education. During the Civil War, Union supporters established schools to Christianize newly freed slaves on the islands off of the South Carolina coast (Urban and Wagoner 2004). At the end of the Civil War, the New England Freedman's Aid Society initiated a movement to bring the word of God to the former population. In this movement, New Englanders again journeyed south to instill an ignorant population with their Christian values (Urban and Wagoner).

Those individuals hoping to spread a national code of conduct also targeted Native Americans. By the 1860s, long after early settlers attempted to Christianize the "heathens" in colonial America, reservation day schools were established to bring Native Americans into mainstream culture. By the 1880s, men such as Richard Henry Pratt (founder of the Carlisle Indian School) were establishing boarding schools in which such acculturation could occur more effectively away from the traditions still upheld on reservations (Urban and Wagoner 2004).

#### *1900–60: Bureaucracy and Education for the Economic Good*

Although much of the nineteenth century included educational philosophies that worked to stabilize society by instilling certain beliefs into students, educators in the next century were more overtly concerned with producing specific behaviors. The Common School of

Mann began to give way to David Tyack's "One Best System," a bureaucratic juggernaut that began grouping students according to age and grade level (Urban and Wagoner 2004). With this new type of school, different values became emphasized. According to Urban and Wagoner, "Punctuality, regularity, obedience, and silence were expected and rewarded" (174). But this is not to say that moral education was completely absent from schools during the early twentieth century. In his Children's Morality Code of 1916, William Hutchins articulated values such as honesty, duty, teamwork, and self-control (Mulkey 1997). Of course, these moral traits did little more than create compliant pupils at school. In a study conducted at the end of the 1920s, Hartshorne and May (ctd. in Beachum and McCray 2005) concluded that the current practices in teaching morality had no positive effect on the moral behavior of students. One of the chief criticisms these researchers made involved the use of direct instruction in the matter (Leming, ctd. in Beachum and McCray).

By the middle of the twentieth century, the country had witnessed a second world war and had begun to shift its educational goals. Although the schools based on the organization of Tyack and the curriculum of *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* report of 1918 addressed issues such as ethical behavior and citizenship, schools after World War II attempted to focus on producing graduates who possessed economic viability. Vocational educator Charles Prosser (ctd. in Urban and Wagoner 2004) proposed a curriculum aimed at giving students the technical skills they would need to survive in the modern world.

By the end of the 1950s, this emphasis on job and life training (coupled with the child-centered philosophies of the Progressives of the 1930s) came under scrutiny. The decade in which the Soviet Union attained nuclear weaponry and sent a satellite into space marked a drastic shift in American education. In 1959, the National Defense Education Act placed the federal government in a policymaking role in the nation's education. Specifically, schools increased efforts in teaching math and science so that American students could compete with their Soviet counterparts (Urban and Wagoner 2004). Character education was not completely abandoned, but it certainly held no real curricular value in comparison with the needs the Soviet threat mandated. In short, modern schools attempted to adapt to modern times. As we can see, as instruments and creations of society, schools emulate their societies.

#### *1960–2000: Attempts at a Revival*

The 1960s saw the advent of the values clarification movement. This idea, which researchers Louis Rath, Merrill Harmon, and Sidney Simon (ctd. in Beachum and McCray 2005) spawned, espoused educating students about moral decisions without imposing the

teachers' or communities' preferred values. Basically, values clarification required teachers to present hypothetical situations (much like my aforementioned situation) and allow students to discuss possible actions in these situations. The hope was to let students talk their way into a cognitive respect for appropriate moral action.

Values clarification reportedly works well, as exemplified by Lawrence Kohlberg's "Six Stages of Moral Development" (Mulkey 1997). According to this theory, people develop their moral judgment in sequenced stages that range from acting to attain rewards or avoid punishment at the lowest level to acting out of respect for human life at the highest level (Mulkey). Kohlberg believed that students could advance through these ordered steps through discussions such as those proposed by values clarification.

The key to Kohlberg's theory and values clarification lies in students developing through cognitive contemplation of behavior. A student could vicariously experience situations that life might not present him with until several years later. Hypothetically, the student would benefit by having their future behavior meet the standards that the community at large would prefer. Of course, this means that teachers would have to patiently allow all students to express their opinions and work through a thought process that earlier attempts at moral indoctrination circumvented. In other words, instead of telling kids how to act (as was the case in American educational history), teachers would have to rely on the students to discover how to act.

Unfortunately, teachers and researchers discovered that students did not always follow the desired path and move toward desired behaviors. The lack of appropriate guidance and the leeway granted to individual perceptions of acceptable behavior permitted students to justify whatever behavior they felt was desirable. Mulkey (1997) cites William Kilpatrick, who wrote that students learned, "A value is essentially what you like or love to do" (91). Students might stall at or revert to a level of thinking aligned with the second stage of Kohlberg's theory: believing that what is right simply corresponds to what meets their individual needs or desires. Recall my student who accepted infidelity because "everyone cheats on their wives."

So, if allowing students to develop at their own risk does not produce tangible results, what then? The 1980s answer to this question came in the form of a behaviorist approach that William Bennett's renewed emphasis on biblical morality spearheaded, especially through encouraging school prayer (Urban and Wagoner 2004). Although mandatory school prayer represents a gross breach of the Constitutional guarantee of separation of church and state, many state officials in this decade passed laws allowing for moments of silence, tacitly permitting students to pray (Urban

and Wagoner). If schools cannot tell kids how to act, officials reasoned, religion certainly could. Hence, encouraging prayer in schools could rejuvenate moral education in youth.

Further evidence of a return to behaviorism lies in the many social programs of the 1980s. The most memorable involved the war on drugs and the "Just Say No" campaign. In the campaign, we see behavior depicted as simply right or wrong. Rather than allowing students to engage in the moral reasoning Kohlberg advocated, they were expected to do what they were told: resist drugs, abstain from sex, or adhere to whatever behavior was deemed correct and appropriate.

Despite these efforts in the 1980s, reform in moral education continued to be a hot topic in the 1990s. In "The Return of Character Education," Thomas Lickona (1993) gave three reasons America should take a renewed interest in the topic. First, he cited a disintegration of the family. He argued, "schools have to teach the values kids aren't learning at home" (8). Next, he detailed startling statistics that indicated depraved teenage behavior. For example, he cited a study from Kikuchi that revealed, in a survey of two thousand sixth through ninth graders, two thirds of the boys and half of the girls felt it was "acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman" when involved in a dating relationship for half a year or more (9). Finally, Lickona called for an increased effort in character education so, as a nation, America could recognize that

we do share a basic morality, essential for our survival; that adults must promote this morality by teaching the young, directly and indirectly, such values as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and civic virtues; and that these values are not merely subjective preferences but that they have objective worth and a claim on our collective conscience. (9)

In other words, Lickona advocated a return to a philosophical approach—specifically, an approach that focuses on our Western heritage and Aristotle's virtue ethics.

Lickona (1998) elaborated on this approach in "Character Education: Seven Crucial Issues." He insisted that character consists of virtues, which he defined as "objectively good human qualities such as wisdom, honesty, kindness, and self-discipline" (77). He also wrote that due to their "intrinsic goodness," these "virtues don't change" (77). According to this logic, religious and cultural beliefs should be irrelevant to good behavior. However, good behavior is not a result of simply memorizing the difference between right and wrong.

Lickona (1998) equated virtues with habits; in other words, they are instilled cognitively. He listed three psychological aspects of character. He wrote, "Character must be broadly conceived to encompass the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of moral-

ity: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action" (78). This means that a student must do more than act according to what is right; he must first know and feel what is right internally. As such, this calls for a much more cognitive approach to moral and character education than what American education has sought in the past two hundred years.

### Where Are We Now?

By the end of the 1990s, however, the need for character education appeared at an apex in the wake of the Columbine shootings. Programs such as "Character Counts" and its "Six Pillars of Character" (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship) came into vogue (Josephson Institute Center for Youth Ethics 2008). The effectiveness of these programs is in doubt, however, halfway through the first decade of the twenty-first century. For one thing, they are not emphasized as viable (i.e., measurable) parts of the curriculum.

This does not mean that curricular and accreditation standards completely ignore moral behavior. For example, the Council on Accreditation and School Improvement, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2005) addresses this in its accreditation rubric under "Standard 9: Citizenship" (12). This standard states, "The school helps students develop civic, social, and personal responsibility," and in 9:1, "[the school] fosters and maintains a safe and orderly environment that promotes honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, responsibility, citizenship, self-discipline, and respect" (12). Notice that these standards do not define a curriculum for this matter.

Tennessee, where I currently reside, also does not define a real curriculum for character or moral education, although it does legally provide for its inclusion in Tennessee schools. According to Tennessee Code Annotated 49-6-1007(a), "The course of instruction in all public schools shall include character education to help each student develop positive values and improve student conduct as students learn to act in harmony with their positive values and learn to become good citizens in their school, community, and society" (Tennessee Department of Education 2005).

Measurement is a key factor. In the new millennium, a discussion of American education cannot take place outside the realm of the No Child Left Behind Act. Measurement lies at the core of this legislation. After all, how do we know students are learning if we cannot measure their learning? So, we have standardized tests that we hope prove what children have and have not learned in their core curricular courses. Morality, however, is not as easy to quantify. Certainly, a school can keep track of its office referrals, suspensions, detentions, and expulsions, but this only documents the worst behaviors of what should be a fraction of the

total school population. A student might never step into the principal's office or sit for detention, but he or she may not experience moral growth, either. Staying out of trouble does not equate to becoming a mature moral actor.

Therefore, although we do create curricular standards for moral behavior, assessment may still be difficult. We could look to Britain for an example of a nation that has provisions for religious education and citizenship in its National Curriculum (Department for Education and Skills, and Quality and Curriculum Authority 2005). The Department for Education and Skills and the Quality and Curriculum Authority author a national curriculum that has placed a greater emphasis on moral development since a social crisis of the mid-1990s (McCulloch and Mathieson 1995). The British system divides school children into four key stages that correspond to students' ages. (For example, key stage four includes students age 11–19.) This curriculum includes a section called *personal, social, and health education* in each key stage. In key stage four, students should, among other things, learn "to challenge offending behaviour, prejudice, bullying, racism and discrimination assertively and take the initiative in giving and receiving support" and learn "about the role and responsibilities of a parent, and the qualities of good parenting and its value to family life" (Department for Education and Skills, and Quality and Curriculum Authority 2005, 217). The Office for Standards in Education (2008) enforces these standards through comprehensive inspections and published reports. Narrative reports from this organization summarize the progress of entire schools on these and other standards.

Meanwhile, although American schools do have programs, classes, and assemblies to address issues such as sex education, drug education, personal health, and family living, the amount of accountability is at a much lower standard. One problem is that students do not take these programs seriously. Romanowski (2003) reported that students do not seriously consider such efforts because they are treated like small children during the presentation. He wrote of a test program, "Because of what the students perceived as a simplistic presentation of character traits, they were quick to dismiss the program" (33). He also suggested that some teachers are reluctant to participate or require student participation in this particular program.

Teacher nonparticipation is understandable in an era when we are careful to not impose unwanted beliefs on others. In the early years of the modern education system, neighborhood and common schools could espouse local community standards to students. Yet, with the centralization that occurred after the National Defense Education Act in 1959, decisions about class content lie not in the hands of mainly homogenous

communities but instead with bureaucracies that make decisions affecting wide constituencies. Furthermore, cultural pluralism has become widespread, resulting in a paucity of homogenous communities. Under these circumstances, teachers may be wise in choosing not to address moral issues.

### Conclusion

Let us return to the original dilemma: What is my role as a teacher in the moral development of students? Perhaps we can learn from the British model. This does not mean that we should promote a set of standards for moral education, and we certainly do not want to devise a rubric to measure such standards. Yet, the British have recognized the plurality that exists in their society. In fact, although the country has a state church, the *Non-Statutory National Framework for Religious Education* of Britain has been drafted with support from a wide range of religious organizations, including Muslims, Hindus, Jews, members of Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, Catholics, and Buddhists. In terms of moral education, then, the country has emphasized universal virtues that allow the schools to teach values in such a way as to avoid conflicts in religious doctrine. Although our American accreditation bodies and curricular documents seek to advocate a similar approach, the general public seems more reluctant to abandon religious ideology for a secular, philosophical approach.

Currently, however, American teachers have little official incentive to engage in much discussion of morality with students. Yet, when we read about crime in our communities, watch a high-speed police chase, or hear the details of a school shooting, we cannot so easily shirk responsibility for assisting students' moral growth. Parents and the wider family

should hold the highest degree of responsibility in this matter. However, if they fail, we are perhaps the only barrier left between the students and potentially life-devastating decisions.

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