The Education of Good Citizens: the role of moral education

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In the Spring 1997 edition of FORUM (Vol. 39, No. 1), Clyde Chitty's editorial 'Morality in the Classroom' challenged the notion that 'morality was teachable'. Chitty's article raises the important issue of the role of the school in the moral development of young people. This concern is high on the agenda at the moment In addition to the prolonged 'moral panic' which has gripped the nation for some time now, with the accompanying calls for schools to give lessons in morality, the education service is itself increasingly examining what exactly is meant by the legal duty to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of the child and of society. With the recent establishment of ministerial advisory groups on citizenship and Personal and Social Education (PSE), as well as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) consultation process on SMSC there is clearly concern at the highest level that changes may be necessary after the moratorium to strengthen this whole area of the school's work. Certainly many teachers are feeling that the huge pressures now on schools to focus on a narrower range of 'standards' have squeezed out important concerns to do with the broader aims of education. But what will schools be asked to do after the moratorium? Chitty fears that we could see a return to a new kind of moral authoritarianism which be rightly argues would be ineffective and would discredit teachers in the eyes of teenagers. However, in this article I want to argue that morality can and should be taught but not necessarily in the form usually advocated.

One difficulty we immediately face in discussing moral education is that the word moral itself has been used ambiguously in the guidance literature to schools. In the first sense, moral means morally good (as in 'he acted morally and not immorally'), and several recent documents have used it in this positive sense. For example, the 1993 document Spiritual and Moral Development (National Curriculum Council, 1993) at one point defined the purpose of moral education as to promote actions which "promote goodness and minimise evil". And the most recent QCA consultation document, (being piloted in 150 schools at the present time) defines moral development as developing "the will to do what is right and to resist temptation". In its second meaning, the term is descriptive rather than evaluative. In this sense, moral defines an area of human life and experience, comparable to other areas such as aesthetic and scientific. Thus we can talk about the moral life or moral argumentation without necessarily being judgmental. I think it is this latter sense that the Ofsted (1995) document defines moral education, describing it as "teaching the principles which distinguish right from wrong".

When politicians and the tabloid newspapers call for more moral education, they generally use the word in the first sense — they want schools to 'make children good' — in its minimum form this would include the avoidance of crime and anti-social behaviour and respecting the law but in its maximal form, it would include serving others and being prepared to make personal sacrifices for the common good. I call this maximalist version a 'high virtue' model of moral education and it has been very strongly represented in the
educational tradition of this country, with its strongly Christian overtones of ethical improvement, self-denial and service to others. But this particular view of the moral life is not shared by all — it is a particular ethic and this makes it difficult for teachers in common (i.e. non-religious) schools to deal with. For one thing, it is not clear whose virtues teachers are supposed to promote as the most acceptable or most approved? Furthermore, they are reluctant to engage in what they feel to be forms of moralising and not only because they believe these to be ineffective. Most teachers do not claim to lead morally perfect lives nor do they presume to tell others to do so. Schools are not churches and teachers are not ministers of religion. They are wary of being exposed to the charge of not practising what they preach and, as professionals, see a clear line between their public and private lives. This line they also recognise holds true for students as well, though it may be less clearly defined in religious schools. And teachers are suspicious of moral education on other grounds. I have commonly encountered the view that moral education in schools is a thinly veiled form of social control, attempting to inculcate a passive respect for the laws of an unjust social order. This is quite often described as preaching 'middle-class morality' — in other words, the imposition of the morality of the propertied classes on the dispossessed. Whether or not one agrees with such views, they certainly demonstrate the controversial nature of moral education. Some of the above difficulties arise, I think, from a confusion between public values and those values which essentially belong to the private domain which schools in liberal democracies are not mandated to invade. By 'public' values, I refer to those values which are essential to the maintenance of the shared life of the community. It is these values which schools can be confident in promoting and given the right pedagogies, can teach. It is widely agreed that we can, in fact, teach certain forms of morality by example. Schools teach morality through the establishment and discussion of rules and codes of conduct, through the quality of relationships and through the experiences provided by the whole of school life. But what about the teaching of morality in the classroom? Chitty suggests that the most we can do is "discuss a whole range of moral, social and health, issues to enable children to make their own informed choices". This, I think, represents standard practice at present and it is this I particularly want to challenge.

There are two curriculum slots where substantive moral issues are on the curriculum in their own right rather than arising as part of other curricular concerns — RE and PSE. In RE the approach is to look at a number of religiously controversial issues such as abortion and examine each of them from the point of view of the major religions. The PSE approach takes issues like social violence or genetic engineering and tries a) to inform students about the issues and b) stimulate debate in the hope that this will clarify and extend their thinking on these issues, leaving the final conclusions to students themselves in the light of their personal values and religious or cultural traditions. The hope is that during such discussions students will develop the skills of analysis and debate. Indeed, many teachers would, I think, claim that the development of these generalisable skills (of critical thinking and argumentation) is really what such lesson are about. The problem with this approach, however, is that it is rather like trying to teach a group of students to play football by putting them on a field with a ball and letting them discover the most effective procedures and skills for themselves. This would not only be inefficient, it would deny them access to much experience from which they could benefit. In the same way, we can help our young people think more effectively in the moral domain through direct teaching and still avoid the charge of moralising or indoctrination. On this view the main task of moral education will be to induct young people as emerging citizens into the moral life of the nation. I call this a public discourse model.
Characteristics of a Public Discourse Model of Moral Education

The primary aim of this approach is to introduce students to the moral discourse embedded in the public life of the community. As citizens, they need to be able to recognise and address those moral concerns thrown up in the everyday encounters of life. And these are not only concerned with doing good or the 'big issues'. The occasions when moral thought and argumentation arise can be very wide ranging and include the legitimate pursuit of one's own ends or the defence of one's own values in the democratic fora. Where individuals, for whatever purpose, wish to engage with others over matters of shared moral concern, they need to learn the language and procedures of the discourse and to master the rules of engagement — otherwise they are at a disadvantage. In doing so, they must be free to draw on, defend or modify their own values. Such a model is likely to be less threatening and more acceptable to students and parents of all cultural groups because it avoids the charge of undermining particular cultural values through the promotion of one view of the good and it seeks to strengthen the common democratic values which aims to preserve cultural difference.

If we describe the home community as one's 'primary' moral community, then the democratic community can be seen as 'secondary', with a distinctive ethical basis and its own shared moral understandings which need to be taught and learned. Students need to be exposed to the moral values and procedures implicit in this civic discourse and, I would argue, schools should be as systematic in this as in other forms of developmental learning. It should certainly begin in the primly school (Rowe & Newton, 1994) and not be left until the later years. Bruner (1989) points to the importance of publicly modelling forms of moral thinking for students in schools. He argues that children do not develop these forms of thinking by instinct but, having first encountered them in society, they draw them into their own social and moral schemas through language and exchange. The child, he says, "seems not only to negotiate sense in his exchanges with others but to carry the problems raised by such ambiguities back into the privacy of his own monologues".

What would such a public discourse model look like in practice? Firstly students need to learn how to distinguish moral issues from non-moral ones. They need to be enabled to see beneath the surface events of life to identify the underlying moral concerns. For this purpose, they need to be introduced systematically to the concepts and vocabulary which characterise this form of discourse. There are a number of key concepts such as rights, responsibilities and justice but there are many others which recur and which indeed even the youngest children in schools actually handle in simple concretised forms — concepts such as right, wrong, good, bad, rules, laws, power, authority, equality, diversity, community — all of them contested, all of them susceptible to different interpretations from within different religious and cultural traditions. At the same time, the process of shared enquiry encourages students to recognise important commonalities and to develop respectful ways of engaging with each other. The sharing of personal perspectives and experiences can be very effective in promoting a sense of community and interdependence.

A further characteristic of this model would be that it introduces students to the long tradition of public moral discourse with its ideas which have been debated and developed for centuries. I am not advocating introducing pure forms of moral philosophy into school but there is no doubt that secondary school students will have encountered and even used many forms of thinking familiar to philosophers (e.g. the utilitarian argument). Pupils will use these forms more effectively if they can recognise them and know their function and limitations. Students should also become familiar with common forms of moral argumentation such as the 'slippery slope' and 'lesser of evils' arguments, as well as learning how language is often in practice used to obscure the truth rather than clarify it or
denigrate the opposition rather than their arguments. In this way, moral education begins to
offer some intellectual challenge and develop a distinctive framework of its own.

The approach I have described has been developed by the Moral Education in Secondary
Schools Project, directed by myself and my colleague Ted Huddleston. It is funded by the
Esmee Fairbairn Charitable Trust. Materials for key stages three and four have been in
schools since January 1997 and teachers have responded well, both to the material and
the approach described above. We developed units of material not around a big issue but
around a particular moral idea or concept, such as "what might prevent someone from
doing wrong if they could do anything they wanted and get away with it?" To do this we
used the classical story of the Ring of Gyges which made Gyges invisible, enabling him to
commit all manner of crimes. The point of the story is to look at the idea of intrinsic and
extrinsic good. In another story from the section on rights, we examine the difficulties
inherent in situations where legitimate rights conflict. In this case, we used the recent
incident in a Nottinghamshire school where the rights of a behaviourally difficult boy were
threatened by a strike of teachers in the school who claimed that he was diverting too
many resources away from the better behaved children. This kind of incident is familiar
enough from news headlines but rarely are students shown how to analyse them from the
point of view of key moral ideas. The Key Stage 3 material includes sections on how to
argue well, on moral virtues, justice, duties, rights, moral decision-making, empathic thinking
and some psychological aspects of moral reasoning, such as rationalisation. The materials
developed for Key Stage 4 re-visit many of the same concepts but at more complex levels.
Some of the materials further examine the importance of moral virtues and others look at
wrong doing and the law. In other sections, we looked at the nature of moral
argumentation and particular aspects of moral reasoning itself, such as the way in which
people draw on different kinds of moral principles to address a problem. Finally, we looked
at the question of morality in public life including the question of how we resolve issues
where different cultural values clash. We also introduce students to the ethical basis of
government and such problems as how a society decides who is responsible for the well-
being of its members. Does the adoption of a model of moral education such as this imply
that we have given up all ideas of moral
education as a vehicle for character development? Not entirely would be the answer. There is evidence that democratic and philosophical discussions can reduce attitudes of intolerance and aggression amongst class members (Lake, 1988; Vari-Szilágyi, 1995). There is undoubtedly a link between the way we perceive the world and the way we act upon it. So, if one learns to become a moral being both experientially and cognitively, let us aspire to provide the most nurturing environment possible in our schools in both of these domains.

Note

The Citizenship Foundation is an independent educational charity working nationally and internationally to promote education for citizenship, for democracy and human rights.

References


