

Moral Reasoning: A Necessary Standard of Learning in Today's Classroom

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Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of real education," (Pasquier, 2007, p. 1). These words ring as true today as they did when he spoke eloquently during the Civil Rights Movement. Character education has taken many different forms, and has varied monikers- moral reasoning, moral education, character development, and civic education- but the substance behind the names has a common thread. The need for children to become productive citizens in American society is the heart of character education. Moral reasoning is imperative for schools to incorporate to truly reach this mission: an educated citizenry.

While the school's primary mission is to promote academic achievement, there is nonetheless a real need for schools to promote character development as well. Studies have shown that when teachers and administrators model core values and students learn skills to resolve conflict peacefully, practice pro-social behaviors, and engage in service to the community, schools have a lower incidence of violence (Virginia CEP, 2000). Grants have been offered through the Department of Education to fund character education, and states have written a provision for it into educational policy. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia has included moral education as a requirement based on the data reported by the Virginia media (Virginia CEP, 2000). It is "intended to educate students regarding those core civic values and virtues which are efficacious to civilized society and are common to the diverse social, cultural, and religious groups of the Commonwealth" (VA Code, 1998, p. 1). Moreover; "the purpose of the character education program shall be to instill in students civic virtues and personal character traits so as to improve the learning environment, promote student achievement, reduce disciplinary problems, and develop civic-minded students of high character" (VA Code, 1998, p. 1).

Moral education is a crucial component for all schools to incorporate into their regular schedules. Teaching moral education in schools is about providing students the skills needed to wrestle with moral dilemmas that they will encounter in their daily lives. It is no longer teaching religious morality, but rather it is the teaching of basic character education. Moreover, this education can be explicit even to the point of being required such as in the case of Virginia (VA Code, 1998). Students wrestle with moral dilemmas in their social lives, but can also do so throughout their social studies textbooks. Not teaching students how to synthesized and analyze moral dilemmas would be educational malpractice. It is imperative to embed moral development in education throughout childhood. This paper will serve to outline the need for moral education in schools and offer ideas for components of moral education that are research-based. In order to lay sufficient groundwork for the importance of moral education in schools, an overview of the history of moral education in schools will be presented, followed by a summary of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Guidelines for moral education in schools will then be delineated. Finally, suggestions for implementation of a moral development program will be offered. Implementing moral education using Kohlberg's model as a theoretical framework will help produce an educated citizenry by directly teaching moral reasoning through content-integrated, dilemma-based discussion, modeling a democratic environment through shared leadership and facilitating growth through stages of moral development.

Moral Education throughout American History

Throughout America's history, its educational system has been revamped while the

foundations of the structure have remained clear. The foundational curriculum over time has included moral education along with reading, writing, and mathematics. Moral education in schools has proven to be “effective in building a sense of American spirit, values and community” (Balch, Saller, & Szolomicki, 1993). Moral education is not a new concept in the American public school system, but rather is a constant thread seen throughout history. Clear examples of moral education can be seen in three time periods of American history: Colonial, National, and Progressive.

Moral Education during the Colonial period

During the Colonial time period the purpose of education throughout the American colonies was to teach children the Protestant religion and to maintain social order. For example, in 1647, the Puritans created a law that required their communities to “establish and support schools” (Balch et al., 1993). The motivation to establish a strong education system was the Puritan belief that schools should teach ethical and moral values grounded in religious belief. The later part of the 17th century saw a shift in moral education as evidenced by the theories of John Locke (Balch et al., 1993) who believed that children were blank slates to be written on; educators took this to mean that society could be changed through the education of children. Educators believed that teaching moral education grounded in religion would create an optimal society (Balch et al., 1993).

Moral Education in the National and Progressive periods

Horace Mann, the Secretary of State for the Board of Education, led the way with a religious based moral education during the Nationalist period. He believed that religion and morality were inseparable. Inspired by Locke’s theories, Mann believed that the perfect educational system would create “the perfect political citizen, the perfect moral person and the perfect worker” (Balch et al., 1993, p.6). As Nationalism gained strength after the Revolutionary War, the goals of education shifted away from religious education towards an education that created patriotic citizens. Moral education

shifted as well. Moral education was still thought to be critical in the education of students but the new morality encompassed more of a patriotic duty and less of a religious morality.

During the early 19th century, Americans believed that schools “could perfect the good person and, at the same, be creating the good society” (Balch, et al., 1993, p.6), with this shift in thinking the Progressive time period began. Moral education absent of religious tones is seen during the Progressive time period. In an effort to separate morality from religion during the Progressive time period, moral education was renamed character education. Character education focused on teaching honor, patriotism and work ethic as a means for developing a strong sense of morality. Schools began to teach virtues such as courage, honesty and fairness. These virtues were not considered part of the standard curriculum but teachers were expected to lead students “to understand the complexities and subtleties of each particular virtue” (Ellenwood, 2007). Thus, character education became the hidden curriculum in schools.

Shifts in Moral Education

Moral education is not a new concept in the American public school system, but rather is a constant thread seen throughout history. Throughout the course of America’s history, moral education has been a component of public schooling. Examples of this phenomenon can clearly be seen in the colonial, nationalist, and progressive time periods. The gradual shift from a colonial religious morality to a progressive patriotic morality established the moral education foundation present in the contemporary mission statements of public schools nationwide: the mission of schools is to produce an educated citizenry. Moral education may have started with a religious basis as seen in colonial times, but has shifted to more civics based with the Nation’s shift towards producing educated citizenry and leaders. Lawrence Kohlberg (1975) theorized stages of moral development that can be used as a theoretical framework for these goals prescribed by public schools today.

Theoretical Framework: Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development

Moral education has been at the heart of American education throughout its history as a country. Varying from explicit religiosity to mere secular overtones, the idea has resonated that people exhibit varying degrees of moral reasoning. Kohlberg (1975) theorized that these varying degrees occur in stages throughout life. According to the theory, moral development occurs at three different levels, with two stages incorporated in each. The levels are the different moral perspectives that individuals struggle with when faced with a moral problem or dilemma. The levels represent the thinking process during the moral dilemmas not the justification for the moral decision (Kohlberg). Moreover, moral development follows these stages, but that they are not necessarily restricted by age.

Pre-Conventional Ethics

The first level is pre-conventional ethics, which is characterized by a high degree of egocentric thought. At this developmental stage, the individual focuses on the potential consequences that are a direct result of actions. The two stages are punishment-obedience, and market exchange. In punishment-obedience reasoning, people make a moral decision dependent upon whether or not being caught is likely as well as what the potential is for punishment if caught (Kohlberg, 1975). The market exchange stage is characterized by the person understanding how the consequence will affect him or her, but wanting the same consequence for someone else too. The market exchange stage has been referred to as the “eye for an eye” stage (Eggen & Kauchak, 1997).

Conventional Ethics

The second level is conventional ethics. No longer is the morality driven by the immediate consequence for self, but the focus shifts to a concern for others. During this level, the individual is able to see the moral dilemma from another person’s perspective. Conventional ethics also has two stages, interpersonal harmony and law and order. The interpersonal harmony stage is guided by the need to live up to others expectations, a sense of loyalty for others, and the importance of maintaining the approval of others (Kohlberg, 1975). A person at this stage may be susceptible to

accepting widely held opinions as his or her own, without consideration of how the majority opinion came to be. This stage is typically encountered during the adolescent years. The law and order stage moves away from the desire to please a certain person, and focuses on the need to follow the rules and laws because they are rules and laws. Here, the individual believes that the rules and laws need to be followed, and does not question the reasoning behind them (Kohlberg, 1975).

Post-Conventional Ethics

The final level in Kohlberg’s theory is post-conventional ethics, only a small percentage of the population ever achieves this level. During the post-conventional ethics level, the individual is able to make moral decisions based on principles. The two stages are social contract and universal principles. Social contract reasoning is believes that society as a whole is rational and should socially agree on all of the laws in order to operate. The laws are no longer simply accepted at face value because they are laws; but rather there is an understanding that laws should be changed to fit the needs of the society. During the universal principles stage, the individual’s moral reasoning is beyond the strict rules of society. Instead, it is founded on abstract principles, beyond the social norms. At this stage moral reasoning is guided by internal universal standards that supersede laws. Kohlberg (1975) believed very few people ever achieved this stage, and did not emphasize it in his work.

Just Community

Kohlberg (1975) saw the founding of the American democratic society in terms of these “post-conventional principles of justices and the rights of human beings, rather than upon the authority central to conventional moral reasoning” (p. 51), and asserted that his theories of moral development should be used as a framework to guide discussion about moral dilemmas in schools. He suggested a school-based reform called “Just Community”, in which a school engages in moral discussions in a democratic community (Kohlberg, 1975). While the Just Community schools did not survive after Kohlberg’s death, the tenets of his

theory form the backbone of the moral education guidelines presented in the following section.

Moral Education in Schools Today

One of the goals of public education is to create an educated citizenry that is productive in society. Citizenship is at the heart of the American way of life, therefore it is imperative to embed moral development in education throughout childhood. Without “shared common values, a society cannot function and maintain the desired degree of cohesiveness that makes a society communal and strong” (Balch et al., 1993, p 4). Educators cannot teach without instilling moral education to their students but not even schools can escape functioning without priorities and a set of values (Ellenwood, 2007). Not taking advantage of the opportunities to explore values, and character development during the school day would only harm the future citizenry. Therefore, it is imperative to embed moral development in education throughout childhood. Implementing moral education using Kohlberg’s model as a theoretical framework will help to produce an educated citizenry by directly teaching moral reasoning through content-integrated dilemma-based discussion, modeling a democratic environment through shared leadership, and facilitating growth through the stages of moral development.

Content-Integrated, Dilemma-Based Moral Discussions

Moral reasoning is a set of abstract concepts that can be examined and evaluated by students through dilemma-based discussions in school. These are tools in which open-ended scenarios are presented and discussed by students with a faculty member serving as a mediator, not as a teacher or leader. Students can argue based on one position or attempt to take on the perspectives of all stakeholders in the scenario (Kohlberg, 1986). The best method for teaching values involves not only instructing the students on collective values, but also challenging them to think analytically and contextually, and to make informed decisions using the social and historical context (Ellenwood, 2007). Moral curriculum is best embedded in content areas such as language arts or social studies especially for

dilemma-based discussions (Kohlberg, 1986). Furthermore, high schools could also potentially offer an ethics-based seminar in one of the core content areas. Embedding the moral reasoning curriculum into core content areas allows both students and teachers to have integrated discussions at various times throughout the school year, rather than in isolation (Kohlberg, 1986). As Aristotle is quoted as saying, “the best way to teach morality is to make it a habit with children” (CharacterKidz, 2008).

Shared Leadership in a Democratic Community

Another important guideline in creating a moral education program is shared leadership, also referred to as a democratic community. One of the underlying goals in moral education is to “develop a community in which students, teachers, and administrators collaborate on establishing ...rules and procedures that are viewed as fair and just among them all” (Howard-Hamilton, 1995, p. 3). The stress on allowing students to share the decision-making roles in the school provides concrete situations in which moral reasoning can be applied; this is important to have in conjunction with the dilemma-based discussions, in which students’ practice moral reasoning via abstract thought and discussion (Kohlberg, 1975). Allowing for student ownership, either in individual classrooms or in the school as a whole, is an important facet of the moral education approach that should be programmatically implemented in schools whose goal is an educated citizenry.

Facilitated Growth through Kohlberg’s Stages

The incorporation of a moral education curriculum can assist children in moving through the moral reasoning stages in an expedient and efficient manner. In the absence of discussion and shared leadership, children will likely move through the stages of moral development very gradually. However, a school environment and curriculum based in moral reasoning the helps to increase student movement through the stages (Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Kohlberg (1975) described the need for explicit education in moral reasoning:

Moral development partly depends upon the intellectual development which is the school’s

first concern, but usually lags behind it. If logical reasoning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for mature moral judgment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for mature moral action. One cannot follow moral principles if one does not understand (or believe in) moral principles. (p. 49)

Three conditions help to facilitate movement through the stages including exposure to the subsequent stage, dissatisfaction with the current stage, and an atmosphere that is conducive to that conflict. Incorporating moral education helps to foster these conditions (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). Dilemma-based discussions serve to provide exposure to higher reasoning, while a community in which leadership is shared provides an open environment for the internal conflict to be resolved. For example, Christian schools incorporating explicit moral instruction had more children exhibiting higher levels of reasoning on Kohlberg's stages than students without this instruction (Norman, Richards & Bear, 1998). Just like students are taught to reason mathematically, they need to be taught to reason morally.

Moral Education in the 21st Century

Moral education has been a part of the educational backdrop throughout this country's history. The 21st century cannot afford to make an exception. Moral reasoning is an important curricular component of the K-12 school experience. By embedding this curriculum into content areas such as language arts and social studies, schools can facilitate moral reasoning without creating an additional course or content burden in schools that are already overwhelmed with curricular imperatives in the standards-based reform movement. The creation of a school community in which leadership is shared and democracy is modeled is also an important component of a 21st century moral education. These features are essential in the structure, however guidelines alone do not create a seamless program; implementation procedures must also be considered.

Considerations for Implementation

The guidelines presented for the moral reasoning curriculum will help to drive public

education closer to its' oft-stated mission of producing an educated citizenry. However, there are two additional considerations that should be taken into account when implementing these curricular modifications. It is important that the dilemma-based discussions and the scenarios presented in this discussion have been created through a culturally respectful lens. Moreover, a new moral education curriculum cannot be successfully implemented without extensive and ongoing professional development.

Culturally-Respectful Moral Education

Moral education has traditionally been undertaken via a majority (male Caucasian) viewpoint; studies show that not all cultures have the same moral values, therefore the future directions in moral reasoning education need to be culture-fair. Baek (2002) found that "Kohlberg missed or misconstrued some moral concepts indigenous to some cultures... based on responses which were not able to be scored within his system" (p. 373) and while Kohlberg's system is able to be used in more than one culture, "this system alone seems insufficient to explain children's moral reasoning. Interpretation of children's moral reasoning should be made by taking account of cultural influences" (p. 289). For example, the Korean concept of chung, referring to the positive emotional bond formed over time, does not have an equivalent on Kohlberg's scale (Baek, 2002). However, Korean youths use chung as an explanation for their moral decisions. Leaders can strive to ensure that dilemma-based discussions and shared leadership are culturally representative through comprehensive staff training.

Professional Development

Embedding a culture-fair moral reasoning curriculum through content-integrated dilemma-based discussion and shared leadership can be facilitated only through extensive and ongoing professional development (Guskey, 1986). The theoretical framework of the moral education plan, in this case Kohlberg's Model, needs to be presented to all faculty, from teachers to administrators. Furthermore, professional development on facilitating content-integrated

moral discussions and shared leadership needs to be ongoing; solitary in-services will not suffice. One necessary component of teacher development crucial to moral education is teacher awareness training. This training would highlight the ways in which schools support what Kohlberg (1983; Kohlberg & Hersh, 2001) called the hidden curriculum (Kohlberg, 1975); functions and traits are conveyed to students from teachers via an unconscious, covert curriculum that is established when teachers define and establish educational procedures. It is difficult for students to reason on a post-conventional level when the conventional level emphasizing law and order, and the punishment focused pre-conventional level, are being modeled by school faculty (Kohlberg & Hersh, 2001). Awareness training highlighting the hidden curriculum, and of what teachers do on a daily basis that supports the hidden curriculum, is important, especially when an emphasis is placed on shared leadership. Schools must model moral reasoning in order for students to internalize it.

Moral education is a necessary component of education for all children. Moral reasoning education can be naturally embedded within much of the language arts and social studies curriculum, but it must be implemented in a way that respects and understands the moral reasoning of minority cultures. Successful implementation of moral reasoning embedded in education must also include a teacher training component. Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Reasoning provides a theoretical framework through which the implementation can take place that furthers the mission of public education.

Conclusion

Implementing moral education using Kohlberg's model as a theoretical framework will help produce an educated citizenry by directly teaching moral reasoning through content-integrated, dilemma-based discussion, modeling a democratic environment through shared leadership and facilitating growth through stages of moral development. Kohlberg believed children respond differently to situations depending on their stage of moral development and that the goal of moral development is a universal sense of justice. These

foundational beliefs correspond to the mission of education: to produce an educated citizenry. Being able to look at a scenario and understand its moral complexities is part of developing a citizen who is able to critically think about and handle moral situations. Class discussions about moral problems not only stimulate growth but provide tools for the students to use later in life when they encounter similar problems, especially when culturally responsive scenarios are used and the value of all cultures is recognized. Schools are a safe environment for children to develop these skills that will be needed later on; ensuring that this environment is a democratic community with shared leadership will help further the moral education curriculum. Training teachers is essential to the success of an educational initiative, and moral education is no exception.

By putting all of the pieces together, content-integrated moral discussions, shared leadership, cultural awareness and teacher training, a moral education curriculum helps to further the mission of education. An educated citizenry is the goal of public education and if moral education is not in the public schools then public education falls short of its goal. In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, "to educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society" (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, 2008, p.1).

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