

Promoting Moral Development in Schools

By RICHARD WEISSBOURD

How can schools inspire and teach students to be moral people—to care about and take responsibility for others, to think clearly about and pursue justice, to sacrifice for important principles? This is not a trivial question. Polls indicate that about 70 percent of public school parents want schools to teach “strict standards of right and wrong,” and 85 percent want schools to teach values. And research suggests that many overworked, frayed parents, doubting their capacities as moral mentors, are looking to schools to take on a larger role in their children’s moral growth.

In response to this demand, a billion-dollar character education industry has cropped up in the last few decades, including myriad organizations marketing packaged character education programs to schools. Many of these programs are devoted to inculcating values such as self-discipline, responsibility for others, and honesty. Some of these initiatives are carefully considered, rigorous, and tuned in both to children’s developmental experiences and to teachers’ needs and capacities. But most of these undertakings appear to have little or no impact on children’s moral lives.

What is moral development, and what types of school programs and efforts are likely to promote it? Why do some school efforts succeed while others fail, and what are the essential principles and ingredients of successful efforts? How can these principles and ingredients realistically be implemented and scaled in a school reform era intensely focused on academic achievement?

Cultivating a Moral Identity

Several years ago, I asked my six-year-old daughter and a few of her friends a question posed in a popular character education program: “Should you be honest with your teacher if you forget your homework?” One of my daughter’s friends hesitated slightly but then piped up: “Do you want me to tell you what you want to hear, or do you want me to tell you the truth?” Emboldened, another friend stated flatly, “I know that you want me to say I should be honest, but nobody is honest about that.”

Many schools post values on walls and reiterate the importance of values in classrooms, during assemblies, and at other school events. But the challenge is not simply moral literacy—in fact, research indicates that most students, like my daughter’s friends, know values such as honesty and respect by the time they are five or six years old. Because they know these values, many children—especially adolescents—feel patronized by lectures about values. And some children, as the question asked by my daughter’s friend suggests, become nimble at simply parroting back what adults want to hear.

The much harder and more important challenge is to develop in children a deep, abiding commitment to these values. The issue isn’t cultivating moral literacy; it’s cultivating moral identity. It’s making these values integral to the self, so that doing what’s right becomes a reflex, and so children are strongly motivated to do what’s right even when it conflicts with other needs and wants.

How do schools cultivate a moral identity in children? At the heart of the matter is closing the rhetoric/reality gap. While schools commonly showcase mission statements that trumpet certain values, the problem is that these values are not consistently promoted throughout the school. Children have a razor-sharp alertness to hypocrisy, and trumpeting values can backfire when children are regularly confronted with gaps between these values and the realities of their school lives. I have been in far too many schools that tout respect for others, yet not uncommonly adults in hallways ignore children repeatedly saying “that’s so gay” and “no homo,” boys make lewd comments to girls, or some students are openly ostracized. Researchers’ videotapes even show some teachers ignoring serious forms of bullying.

To cultivate a moral identity in children, values need to live and breathe in many aspects of school functioning. The degree to which that happens depends on whether teachers as well as administrators, custodians, lunch staff, sports coaches, and other school-affiliated staff develop common norms and

guidelines for how they will cultivate key values and how they will hold themselves accountable. Accountability begins with school staff periodically scanning and collecting data on various school contexts and asking whether values such as caring and responsibility are being effectively promoted or violated. As character education expert Thomas Lickona puts it, schools can also be more mindful of the “hidden moral curriculum.” Many decisions about tracking and special education, discipline, and curriculum, for instance, send moral messages to students about equity, responsibility for others, and justice that may or may not be aligned with a school’s declared values.

Teachers as Moral Mentors

To develop a moral identity in students, it’s perhaps most fundamental and central for schools to strengthen teacher-student relationships. What makes so much of character education these days irrelevant, if not a travesty, is that it has no impact on these relationships or on adults’ own moral mentoring capacities.

Moral development mainly transpires in relationships, especially when children want to emulate and be guided by other children and adults they respect. Teachers don’t choose whether they want to influence children’s characters. Teachers are always influencing moral attitudes and capacities, for example, by what they choose to reward and punish, how fairly they balance different students’ needs, whether they alert children to injustice and justice in the school and world around them, how they define students’ obligations to each other, and what they model day to day.

Yet, while teachers may spend a great deal of time talking about pedagogy, they are not commonly expected to talk about how they might improve their relationships with students, what they are modeling, or their own capacities as moral mentors. Teachers typically aren’t given time or support to talk about why certain students don’t seem to respect them, or how they might better mentor a student who drives them crazy. While many teachers are quite naturally self-reflective, effective moral models and mentors, other teachers are not mindful—and they receive no feedback—about what they are modeling for children.

Further, in many middle schools and high schools, as Tufts University psychologist and former high school administrator Laura Rogers puts it, there’s “a high wall separating the culture of students and the culture of teachers.” Some teachers are very tuned in to student dynamics, while other teachers can’t effectively mentor students because they don’t know who’s being ostracized or bullied, who’s in a destructive romantic relationship, or when and where a fight between students will break out.

Like other adults, teachers may also unknowingly reproduce aspects of children’s cultures they are trying to correct. They are bystanders, for example, when they know another teacher is functioning poorly or acting unfairly. Notions of loyalty and a “culture of nice” can make them unwilling to challenge each other appropriately. Further, many urban teachers, especially, are dealing with daily stresses, including large class sizes, inadequate materials, and isolation, that can sap the very qualities that are key to shepherding children’s moral growth: empathy, patience, consistency, and moral idealism.

Minimally, schools should become places where teachers have regular chances to talk about these relationships and to deepen their ability to understand students’ perspectives, to overcome biases, and to deepen their moral understandings. Part of this work will involve changing teachers’ basic conceptions about their own development. Like other adults, teachers often see their moral qualities as set in stone. They often don’t see themselves as working to become more fair or generous or to better understand others’ perspectives. Yet, as a good deal of research now reveals, adults can both morally progress and regress at every stage of their lives, and adults’ own unfolding moral development can deeply affect children’s unfolding moral development.

Measuring Schools as Moral Environments

These days, schools commonly use data on student achievement to guide instructional decisions. Further, principals often hold teachers accountable based on student achievement data, and districts may hold schools accountable based on this data. If schools and districts are serious about moral development, they similarly need to be guided by and hold themselves accountable based on data related to moral growth.

That means doing something schools rarely do: periodically collect data from students about how the school is functioning as a moral environment. Students, after all, are the experts on many aspects of their social and ethical environments. Schools can collect data, for example, about whether and where students feel emotionally and physically safe and unsafe, whether there are adults they can consult if they feel harassed or isolated, and whether they view the school as caring about them and others. Minimally, schools can take concrete steps to identify students who are not anchored to an adult—and who are most at risk of moral troubles—and to create ties for them with school staff. For instance, at an annual staff meeting at the Bowman Elementary School in Anchorage, Alaska, the name of every student is written on a paper star posted on the wall, and staff members put their names next to the stars of every student with whom they have a significant relationship. The school then makes sure that staff members check in with isolated students on a regular basis, even if it's just a casual conversation. More students now report feeling attached to an adult.

Schools might also periodically assess what Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty member Stephanie Jones calls “microenvironments”—hallways, cafeterias, gyms, buses. Levels of bullying and harassment, Jones points out, are often high in these contexts, and this kind of mapping can help school staff pinpoint and respond in those places where bullying and harassment are most likely to occur.

This kind of data can lead to real accountability. When deputy superintendents meet with principals, for example, they can check in on not just student performance data but how schools are functioning as moral communities, and they can help principals develop strategies in response to this data.

There is much more schools can do to promote moral development. In many aspects of the curriculum, students can have opportunities to reflect on values—what does it mean, for example, to truly appreciate the perspective of someone different from you in background or ideology?—and to mull over moral dilemmas and questions, especially those that emerge from their daily experiences. “Should I back up my best friend in a fight even though I know he’s wrong? Should I tell someone a popular student stole an iPod, even though I might end up a social leper?”

Discipline policies can promote important forms of inquiry as well. Too often schools respond to violations of school values and policies simply by stepping up punishments or tightening rules. Yet these transgressions offer opportunities to reflect on why the transgression occurred, how it affected others, and why certain moral standards exist. Students are more likely to deeply embrace a value if they understand why and how it supports a common good.

Schools and teachers can promote habits and routines that build dispositions to care for others, and they can work to create democratic communities—opportunities for students, guided by adults, to create moral norms and rules for the classroom or school, to solve ethical dilemmas in the classroom, and to determine sanctions. The Child Development Project and Open Circle are two thoughtful programs that guide teachers in creating these communities. Well-structured, meaningful community service opportunities can bolster a child’s moral identity. Schools can purposefully hire teachers who care about moral development, and they can be sensitive to who the messenger is. It’s often most effective for respected male sports coaches, for example, to convey messages to teenage boys about respecting girls.

Finally, because parents are the most important influence on children’s moral development, schools that are serious about moral development will engage parents in respectful and meaningful ways and convey to parents that they are part of a moral community—a community where, among other things, parents have responsibility for children other than their own child.

This may seem like a tall order, especially in an era when schools are trying hard to boost their achievement scores. But some of what I describe here is inexpensive and not very hard to implement—including periodically attending to closing the rhetoric/reality gap and to improving teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships, developing more democratic communities, and making a concern for moral development a factor in hiring teachers. Furthermore, creating strong teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships is at the heart of bolstering academic achievement. Perhaps most important, unlike numerous other character education efforts, this work stands a chance of giving Americans what they say they want: children who are caring and respectful and who want to create a better and more just world.