Moral Education in America's Schools: The Continuing Challenge

by Thomas Hunt
& Monalisa McCurry Mullins

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Moral Education in America's Schools: The Continuing Challenge

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thomas Hunt wishes to dedicate this book to his sister Sue, and her husband Norb, and to his brother John, and his wife, Barbara, for their love and support over the years. Monalisa Mullins dedicates this book to her parents, Reba and Leonard McCurry, who taught her, by their example, the true meaning of moral goodness.

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PREFACE

It was the tragedy of the Columbine massacre on April 20, 1999 that gave rise to this book. As the result of the shootings there, and several other acts of violence that occurred in or around American public schools in its wake, there was a renewed focus on moral/character education in American schools. Commercial programs featuring moral/character education were developed; the United States Department of Education recognized "Schools of Character"; and curricular programs such as Thomas Lickona's 4th and 5th Rs received more attention.

As this book will show, moral education has been a priority in American schools from the outset. Writing in the bicentennial issue of the *History of Education Quarterly* in 1976, historian Michael B. Katz penned "it would constitute a minor educational revolution if the emphasis, or primary goal of public schooling shifted from the development of character to the cultivation of intellect."[1] Katz is far from alone with this observation. For instance, the historical evidence presented in B. Edward McClellan's excellent book, *Moral Education in America: Schools and the Shaping of Character from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Teachers College, 1999) and in David Purpel and Kevin Ryan (eds.), *Moral Education: It Comes With the Territory* (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1976) substantiate Katz's assertion. That the concern over moral education in American society in general and in American public schools in particular has not diminished is clear from Lickona's most recent book, *Character Matters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), which presents strategies on "How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues."[2]

It is also evident in organizations such as "Character Education Partnership" (CEP) that just announced its 11th National Forum, this one entitled "Exploring Pathways to Civic Character." On its agenda is a "full-day session on CEP's *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education: The who, what, where, when and why.*" Thomas Lickona is among its featured speakers.[3]

Confirmation in the form of Gallup Polls from two periods, the 1970s and 1980s, and in the 1990s-early 2000s, attests to the primacy of moral education in schools. From 1972 through 1984, for instance, the public identified "Lack of discipline" as the main problem confronting American public schools. Other behavior-related items, such as "use of drugs" consistently retained a high rating, almost always surpassing any curricular concerns.[4] The 1976 poll revealed that 67% of the respondents wanted the public schools to "take on a share" of responsibility for the "moral behavior" of students.[5] A year earlier, in 1975, 79% favored instruction in morals in the public schools with but 11% opposed.[6] In 1974, 77% of those polled supported school-sponsored prayer in the public schools.[7] In 1981, the respondents by a ratio of approximately four to one (70% to 17%) favored instruction in public schools that "would deal with values and ethical behavior."[8]

Gallup Polls in the last decade reveal similar sentiments. "Lack of discipline" has ranked either first or second as the major problem facing public schools in every year since 1995.[9] In 2002, when it ranked second to "School funding," 76% of the respondents said that "discipline was a very or somewhat serious problem."[10] "Drug abuse," which ranked first from 1986 through 1991 ("lack of discipline" was second in each of these years), was again first in 1996, and along with "fighting, violence, gangs," was ranked consistently more serious than items such as "getting good teachers" and "low pay for teachers" during this period.[11]

It is interesting to note that in 1987, under the influence of then-Secretary of Education William Bennett, character education was promoted as an activity to be carried out by the public schools. The 1987 poll revealed that 43% of the respondents favored the public schools teaching courses on "values and ethical character."[12]

This past winter I was fortunate to enlist the services of a colleague, Dr. Monalisa Mullins, to serve as coauthor. Professor Mullins contributed Chapter Thirteen and Chapters Fifteen through Seventeen. She earned the title of co-author, indeed.

This book is not a comprehensive history of moral/character education in American schools, which is almost entirely devoted to public schools. Rather, it is an episodic history that deals with selected periods, movements, and individuals throughout the course of American educational history from the time of colonial Massachusetts in the 17th century up to

present times. Chapter One reveals that while moral education was not the sole purpose of schools in Puritan Massachusetts in the colonial era, it indeed was an uppermost concern of the time. Based on Puritan theology, schools were to instill the truths of the Calvinist faith and inculcate their version of Christian morality in the students.

By the time of the American Revolution, the basis of morality had somewhat shifted to the position that there was an inexorable link between republican government, democracy, popular education, and virtue and knowledge, as Chapter Two shows. The teaching of leaders like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster is featured along with supporting testimony from legislation such as the Northwest Ordinance that stated, "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."[13]

The Lancaster Method, as practiced in New York City in the early years of the 19th century is the focus of Chapter Three. Wealthy philanthropists, such as DeWitt Clinton, gave of their means to provide what they deemed was an appropriate moral education for the children of the poor who were not being schooled by one of the various charity schools that had been erected by the city religious societies.

Chapter Four concentrates on the famous common school movement of Horace Mann et al. Dominated by Unitarians at the outset, the common school crusade of Mann looked to the state to found and operate primary schools that were financially supported by public taxes and intended for every girl or boy, rich or poor, in the state. Allegedly nonsectarian, the common school fostered a morality built on devotional Bible-reading and what were termed the "common core truths" of Christianity. Pan-Protestant to the core, the common school was to create a moral climate in the school that would eradicate social problems such as poverty and crime.

The common schools were destined for failure, the movement backers claimed, unless they were under state control and taught by persons steeped in the traditions of the common school. Chapter Five points out that the ideal situation, as envisioned by the movement's advocates, could be realized only by the state-run normal schools, which would prepare teachers immersed in the moral virtues of the common school. Never in the majority until the 20th century, the antebellum normal school created by Mann and his allies constituted the vehicle through which the morals expressed by the common school movement could be transmitted to the young to bring about a peaceful, harmonious, prosperous Commonwealth.

Chapter Six directs its attention to the South, assessing moral education in the ante- and post-bellum eras. The South's leading state, Virginia,

is used as a case study. Particular attention is given to the educational efforts of Charles Fenton Mercer and Henry Ruffner prior to the Civil War, and to Henry's son, William Henry, Virginia's first state superintendent of public instruction, after the conflict. Like Mann before him, the younger Ruffner defended the common school, though segregated by race, from critics who assailed the moral role of public education, contending that it was incapable by its very nature of morally educating.

Chapter Seven represents a shift from public education to the moral efforts of the 19th century Catholic parochial school. Founded in the main to protect the faith of an impoverished immigrant population from the onslaughts first, of the pan-Protestant school, and second, from the "American" secular school, Catholic parochial schools played an indispensable role in preserving the religious identity of young Catholics. Catholic ethical teaching formed the basis of those schools' moral education.

Overlapping Chapters Four through Seven is the study of the Bible as an agent of moral education that occurs in Chapter Eight. The purpose of the use of the Sacred Scriptures, King James Version, in the common schools was clear: to imbue the minds of the students with the moral influence that the texts were calculated to convey. The state of Wisconsin, which witnessed an ever-growing struggle over the position of the devotional reading of the Bible in public schools, is employed as a case study. The struggle, which culminated in the decision by the Supreme Court of Wisconsin in 1890 that adjudged that such Bible-reading constituted sectarian instruction (the first such decision of its kind in the nation) and was therefore unconstitutional, was a devastating blow to the adherents of "Bible America." These people, steeped in the traditions of mainstream Protestantism, forecast a dismal future for the morality of Wisconsin common school students and its society as a result.

Like Chapter Eight, Chapter Nine's time span covers the events described in Chapters Four through Seven. Devoted to the *McGuffey Readers*, the chapter traces their history of being next only to the Bible as an instrument of moral education in the public schools. Estimates of more than 122 million being produced over nearly a century attest to their widespread use. They strove to unify the nation around a common school system, at first through Calvinistic moral teachings and later by more of a deistic orientation.

The Civil War had a plethora of major consequences for American society. Chapters Ten and Eleven treat two of the War's educational effects. Chapter Ten deals with the development of the "American" public school, "de-Protestantized "to some extent, especially in certain parts of the country. Patriotism, and the secular virtues that came in its wake, became the dominant force in moral education in many quarters. Mea-

sures such as the Blaine Amendment were put forth to minimize parochial schools, deemed "unpatriotic" by American nativists. It was at this juncture that the belief was born that the public school is not only a bulwark of democracy, it is also a *sine qua non* for the continued existence of the American way of life. The public school was the indispensable agency that made America great; it was the means by which the American form of government was preserved. All who supported it in this fashion were good and loyal citizens, those who did not were suspect.

The War had another major, but strikingly different, effect on the former slaves in the South. Chapter Eleven examines the particular version of moral education that the white patricians of the South, in league with leading industrialists from the North, tried to impose on the Freedmen in the South. These attempts were embodied first in the segregated common schools of the former confederacy, and second, in what James Anderson has aptly described as the "Hampton Model" (Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, esp. pp. 33-78). Using Virginia as a case study, Chapter Eleven shows that the moral education designed for the Freedmen consisted of trying to make them docile, moral servants of the dominant white class, to be achieved through working with their hands, ready to "accept their place" in a society that reflected the white southerner's interpretation of Christianity.

Chapter Twelve is directed to the thrust of moral education in the schools of the early 20th century. Beset by a burgeoning immigrant population, which hailed in the main from southern and Eastern Europe, many who located in the teeming cities of the northeast United States, the nation turned to its public schools to make "good Americans" out of the children of the recent arrivals. (Again, parochial schools were distrusted as havens of the old world and its ways, including the Catholic religion, were often dismissed as "unpatriotic.") Characterized especially by use of the English language, the moral efforts sometimes resulted in separating immigrant children from their parents, who, by clinging to their old world ways, were not really able to qualify as "good Americans." National Education Association documents, such as the "Cardinal Principles" Report of 1918 serve as an illustration of the public schools' attempts to inculcate the "right" virtues in their students, replacing the Church and the parents in this attempt.

Born in Vermont in 1859, John Dewey became perhaps the best known educational philosopher in the annals of American education. An analytic thinker and prolific writer, Dewey looked to the schools to educate intellectually, morally, and socially. Chapter Thirteen addresses Progressive educator Dewey's theories of materialistic epistemology and experiential education, albeit in a most brief way, in a manner that helps us under-

stand the justification for a moral education curriculum. Reflective thought, Dewey believed, could transform a clouded moral situation into a clear one. Intelligence, then, can be as effective in the realm of morality and values as it is in science. An eclectic, Dewey held that moral education must reflect the individual's sense of purpose of gaining full citizenship within the community, while still maintaining the individual rights associated with democracy.

The Educational Policies Commission (EPC) was formed in 1935 and functioned until its demise in 1968, when *ad hoc* policy committees were chosen to supplant the EPC. Dominated over the years by persons affiliated with educational administration, the EPC concentrated on the teaching of democratic values in the public schools, which were regarded as the most fitting instrument for a democratic society, in a period of conflict with the "isms" of fascism and then communism. Its best-known publication in the area of moral education was published in 1951. Entitled *Moral and Spiritual Values in the Public Schools,* it declared that "there must be no question whatever as to the willingness of the school to subordinate all other considerations to those which concern moral and spiritual standards."[14]

The cognitive moral development approach of Lawrence Kohlberg makes up Chapter Fifteen. Based in part on the developmental theories of Jean Piaget, Kohlberg shaped his theory of the stages of moral development that are hierarchically integrated. Using hypothetical moral dilemmas as a teaching tool, Kohlberg posited levels of moral conscience ranging from the Preconventional (Level I) through Conventional (Level II) to Postconventional (Level III). He suggested that our moral conscience progresses from an initial concern for the consequences of actions to a concern for approval from others, and culminates in the final stage, in which our conscience makes moral judgments based on the principle of universality and the internalization of ideals such as respect for others as persons of intrinsic worth. Kohlberg's moral development approach has been criticized as lacking sensitivity to the issues of gender and cultural variance.

Values clarification, which came on strong in the educational world in the 1970s and remained a force throughout the 1980s, is the topic of Chapter Sixteen. The movement stressed the role of the teacher as facilitator or discussion leader rather than a transmitter of a value system, their own or society's. The process consisted of seven steps, the three chief being (1) choosing one's values, (2) prizing those values, and (3) acting in accordance with those values. Spearheaded by Louis Raths, Sidney Simon, and Howard Kirschenbaum who claimed their program espoused value neutrality and respect for the pluralism of values, values

clarification was roundly criticized as being subjective and as fostering moral relativism.

The final chapter of this book, Seventeen, addresses the current Character Education movement. Spurred by what is believed by many to be declining moral values throughout American society, a number of efforts have been put forth that involved the schools as a major partner to combat these social ills. Foremost among these efforts has been the work of Thomas Lickona. Arguing for the teaching of core values, Lickona has published several key books on the topic of character education. Advocating what he terms the "fourth and fifth R's," i.e., respect and responsibility, Lickona has urged the teaching of good moral conduct and decision making as necessary to offset the negative impact of social influences, especially those of the mass media. Lickona suggests that the core values are those that promote human rights and affirm human dignity. There are a number of other programs of moral education presently operating in public schools. One of the most popular of these is CHARACTER COUNTS! All of these models attempt to teach core values that can be taught directly through various course curricula. School organizations are also employed in the character education movement, as is service learning. There is some opposition to the Character Education movement, much of it stemming from parental groups who see these programs as a usurpation of family prerogatives and as a manifestation of what has been called the religion of secular humanism.

This book is an episodic, not a comprehensive, history of moral education in America schools, especially its public ones. It is a tale that is fraught with friction and controversy, even legal challenge. Given the nature of the topic, and the passion with which it has been and is currently viewed, it will ever be thus.

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NOTES

1. Character Education Partnership, "Exploring Pathways to Civic Character," Washington, DC: 2004.
2. Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004, cover.
3. Character Education Partnership, "Exploring Pathways to Civic Character," Washington, DC: 2004.
4. George H. Gallup, "Sixth Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* 56 (September 1974); 21; Gallup, "Seventh Annual Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* 57

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5. Gallup, "Eighth Poll," Ibid., (1976):197.
6. Gallup, "Seventh Poll," Ibid., (1975): 228.
7. Gallup, "Sixth Poll," Ibid., (1974): 21.
8. Gallup, "Thirteenth Poll," Ibid., (1981): 39.
9. Stanley M. Elam and Lowell C. Rose, "The 27th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (September 1995): 41; Elam, Rose, and Alec M. Gallup, "The 28th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 78 (September 1996): 49; Rose, Gallup, and Elam, " The 29th Annual Phi Delta Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 79 (September 1997): 42; Rose and Gallup, "The 30th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 80 (September 1998): 51; Rose and Gallup, "The 31st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 81 (September 1999): 42; Rose and Gallup, "The 32nd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 82 (September 2000): 46; Rose and Gallup," The 33rd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 83 (September 2001): 42; Rose and Gallup, "The 34th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 84 (September 2002): 43; and Rose and Gallup, "The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 85 (September 2003): 50.
10. Rose and Gallup, "34th Poll," Ibid., (2002): 43.
11. Alec M. Gallup, "The 18th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 68 (September 1986): 43; Gallup and David L. Clark, "The 19th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 69 (September 1987): 28; Gallup and Stanley M. Elam, "The 20th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 70 (September 1988): 34; Elam and Gallup, "The 21st Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 71

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12. Gallup and Elam, "20th Poll," Ibid., (1987): 24.
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14. Educational Policies Commission, *Moral and Spiritual Values in the Public Schools*. Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1951, 54.

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CHAPTER 1

COLONIAL BEGINNINGS

INTRODUCTION

Bernard Bailyn, among others, has clearly shown that public education of the twentieth century was not the result of a straight line emanating from the schools of colonial Massachusetts (Bailyn, 1960). Jernegan observes, however, that these schools were "first in importance" in this era, in their "number, character, distribution, and quality." Education was also the responsibility of civil government, as then constituted (Jernegan, 1931, pp. 64-65). As such, they are selected to be the first schools to be scrutinized for their commitment to moral/character education.

William Bradford, as noted in the *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, reports that the early Massachusetts residents left Holland because of the "licentiousness of youth in that country," which posed a "danger to their souls, to the great grief of their parents and dishonor of God."[1] John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, put forth the following reason in his justification of their trans-Atlantic migration:

> 5. The fountains of learning and religion are so corrupted that most children, even the best wits and fairest hopes, are perverted, corrupted, and utterly overthrown by the multitude of evil examples and the licentious government of those seminaries.[2]

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