



Habits of Mind

**Struggling Over Values
in America's Classrooms**



Jossey-Bass Publishers • San Francisco

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For sales outside the United States, please contact your local Paramount Publishing International office.



Manufactured in the United States of America on Lyons Falls Pathfinder Tradebook. This paper is acid-free and 100 percent totally chlorine-free.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fine, Melinda, date.

Habits of Mind: Struggling Over Values in America's Classrooms / Melinda Fine. — 1st ed.

p. cm. — (The Jossey-Bass education series)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-7879-0061-3 (alk. paper)

1. Moral education—United States—Case studies. 2. Race relations—Study and teaching—United States—Case studies. 3. Educational sociology—United States—Case studies. 4. Politics and education—United States—Case studies. 5. Moral education—Massachusetts—Cambridge. I. Title. II. Series.

LC311.F47 1995

370.11'4—dc20

94-41818

CIP

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Code 9517

Habits of Mind

Melinda Fine

The Jossey-Bass Education Series

For Zach and Talya, with
enormous thanks for the gift
of their love

Preface

Within the past two decades, American public education has become an increasingly important political issue. Many people have argued that our public schools are in deep trouble. Some point to the schools' seeming inability to turn out young people equipped with intellectual skills and a mastery of subjects traditionally deemed important. Others argue that schools are not taking advantage of their opportunity to impart moral values to students, pointing to alarming increases in acts of vandalism, violent assault, and bigotry committed by the young. And there has been much discussion about how schools can help an increasingly diverse student body deal with the conflicts and differences they encounter within and beyond school walls. These debates center around a fundamental question: What should our public schools be teaching and how should they be teaching it? Confronted with the fact of diversity, many educators now believe that America's public schools should help young people sort through today's many cultural, social, and political challenges. They call on schools to enhance their moral commitment to students by preparing them for an informed, principled engagement with the different communities and perspectives that make up the American democracy. This call has stirred a contentious debate that has deep roots in American history.

Much has been written about various aspects of this debate in the past several years. Some books use broad strokes to describe diverse programs that foster critical moral thinking, good character, and civic responsibility, while others focus more sharply on how

specific programs are implemented in the classroom. This literature is illuminating, but it leaves some important gaps. Works that describe a range of programs are usually too broadly focused to shed much light on what happens once the programs are implemented in the classroom. Close-up studies often fail to assess what actually happens in the classroom in relation to public debates about what allegedly happens there. Those who argue from the policy arena frequently claim to know what is best for students, but they all too often lack contact with them in schools, where things are usually more subtle, complex, and ambiguous.

Habits of Mind moves the reader beyond the polemical and often caricatured arguments raised for or against programs to foster critical moral thinking, good character, and social responsibility in young people. Grounded in an in-depth study of the politics and practice of a single curriculum, it integrates a close-up look at the classroom with a broader discussion of educational theory and policy. It focuses on the nationally acclaimed yet politically controversial *Facing History and Ourselves* (FHAO) program, a course that uses a rigorous historical study of the Holocaust to guide students' critical reflection on contemporary racism, violence, intolerance, and prejudice. In exploring both how theoretical and policy arguments inform classroom dynamics and how classroom realities qualify theoretical positions, it gives a more nuanced portrayal of students' actual experience and a more accurate picture of the political issues at stake in this timely public debate.

Yet what I present here is more than a case study of a particular curriculum used in a single classroom, for the issues this book addresses are by no means unique to the FHAO program. The political influence of the New Right has been brought to bear not only against this program but against many other educational curricula and practices, while the values these students struggle over are broadly relevant in these times of contentious debate over diversity, national identity, and morality. As the writer Eudora Welty has noted in another context, "One place comprehended can make us understand other places better."

This book is conceived as a series of ever-widening lenses through which I view the politics and practice of curricula to foster critical moral thinking and social responsibility. The tightest lens looks at the classroom. It examines the daily practice of the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum in one multiracial middle school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A second lens focuses on educational policy. It describes how FHAO and related educational programs fared during the Reagan era, when the New Right enjoyed heightened political influence. The widest lens provides a historical as well as an explicitly political perspective. It locates the issues raised by the Facing History and Ourselves case within American educational and political discourse more generally.

Overview of the Contents

The specific organization of the book is as follows. Chapter One, the introduction, presents a brief portrait of adolescents from the Boston area who have been brought together to discuss race relations. Through describing the conflicts and tensions illuminated by their discussion, I argue that young people are ready and eager to reckon with conflicting differences in American society, and that schools must prepare them to do so responsibly. The chapter also provides an overview of the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum.

The following three chapters describe classroom sessions in which the Facing History course engenders potentially conflictual differences among students. In this portion of the book, I look at how course pedagogy and materials help students deal with these differences. Chapter Two introduces the students, teacher, school, and community that ground this study and describes a lesson early on in the course where students began to define their "identity" in personal and social terms. Chapter Three looks at related class sessions later in the semester where differences in religious perspectives were brought to light. Chapter Four describes a series of classes toward the end of the course where contentious political differences

—in American society at large and in the microcosm of the classroom—were hotly debated.

The issues brought to light in these opening chapters are not unique to the Facing History curriculum. Chapter Five traces the history of programs to foster critical moral thinking and social responsibility in the schools and notes the struggles they engendered along the way. Beginning with the curricular reforms of Progressive educators in the 1930s and 1940s, and ending with recent battles over “moral openness,” “cultural literacy,” and “multiculturalism,” the chapter argues that conflicts over educational vision, policy, and practice have always been linked to conflicts over competing visions of American democracy, its past, and its future.

Chapter Six situates these visions as they are manifested in the political arena by describing the increasing influence of New Right activists in matters of educational policy, particularly during the Reagan presidency. It analyzes the battle that ensued over federal funding for Facing History and Ourselves between 1986 and 1988. The chapter discusses how this controversy was framed alternatively by public policy makers, educators, New Right activists, and the media, thereby illuminating gaps and silences in public discourse on education in American society.

Chapter Seven, the conclusion, interprets the relationship between classroom practice, theory, and policy in light of the broader contemporary debate about dealing with difference in American society. I argue that promoting students’ critical moral thinking is a vital responsibility of today’s schools—a responsibility essential to nurturing critical participatory democracy.

Goals and Methodology

Having briefly outlined what this book is about, I would like to make clear what it is not about. This book will not be tracing how the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum affected the beliefs of students over a long period of time, and it will not assess whether they in fact grew up to become active, responsible citi-

zens. My focus is more immediate. I wanted to learn how students and their teacher interpreted issues raised by the Facing History course, and I assumed that these interpretations would shift throughout the semester, at times producing conflict among members of the class. I intended to describe how these conflicts were negotiated within the classroom. These concerns dictated a phenomenological and self-consciously personal approach to my subject. They required my daily presence in the classroom for an entire semester and my use of a variety of research methods, including participant observation, descriptive note-taking during class and analytical commentary notes after class, lengthy and at times repeated one-on-one interviews with students and their teacher, an interpretive reading of these interviews, and an ongoing review of all students' written work for the course. The classroom chapters of the book are a work of social science portraiture, designed to reveal dynamics and raise questions rather than to evaluate—or even to define—the curriculum's "success." As a matter of both research inquiry and writing style, portraiture investigates, describes, and analyzes characters, settings, and events in context, in relation to one another, keeping in mind the researcher's own relationship with his or her subject. Equally important, it seeks to engage the reader in the particular experience described in order to give him or her a sense of a larger whole.

This study is also deliberately grounded in one program's implementation in an urban, alternative middle school, and it does not presume to describe all critical moral thinking and social responsibility programs in all types of settings. I consider this focus an asset, because without having some hint of the million and one elements that go into putting any program in place—the school and community culture, the teacher, the students themselves, their parents' attitudes and beliefs, and more—we cannot understand how and why that program operates in that particular place in the way that it does. In fact, maybe we should be suspicious of authors who make grandiose claims in speaking for all students in all settings. These claims tend to obscure students' actual experience and are part of

the problem with today's murky and highly politicized debates. On the other hand, I believe we can see a bigger picture by looking at things on a more micro level, because the issues that any single group of students wrestle with resonate in the different but not wholly dissimilar experiences of students in other settings, schools, and communities.

In writing on this topic, finally, I do not pretend to be a dispassionate, objective observer. Everyone speaks from some position, and rather than pretend that these positions do not exist, we need to make them as clear as possible. I am a strong supporter of the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum, and more generally of programs to foster critical moral thinking and social responsibility. I began doctoral work in education after working in the peace and feminist movements for a long time, and I came deliberately looking for models for developing social conscience in young people. I developed a professional collaboration with the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum early on in my doctoral studies, and that relationship has continued to grow over the past several years. I have observed and written on the program's implementation in a variety of middle and high schools in urban settings, and I have spoken at length with the program's teachers through my participation on the organization's national teacher training team.

This relationship has created opportunities as well as constraints, because by working closely with the organization, I have developed friendships with its teachers and staff and gained access to organizational files, staff meetings, and internal discussions. This access has deepened my understanding of the program, but at the same time it has demanded that I be vigilant in viewing its classroom practice in a fair and critical light. I identify where I stand in relation to this subject not to suggest that researcher "bias" undermines the validity of my observations—as if some wholly neutral position were a preferable point of departure, or even possible to attain. I believe all researchers stand in some relation to their subject; the reader simply deserves to know where I stand before I begin to describe and interpret these classroom events.

Intended Audience

This book has been written with several different but perhaps overlapping audiences in mind. Readers with a general interest in education as an important arena of conflict in American politics and culture may find my discussion of the challenge of diversity within the educational domain particularly provocative. Teachers who are grappling with these kinds of issues every day in their classrooms may find it illuminating. Curriculum designers, educational administrators, policy makers, and activists, as well as those interested in the power and practice of the New Right, may be drawn to the book's discussion of Facing History's protracted battle in the policy arena during the Reagan years. And academics may wish to use the book in courses on moral development, educational policy and history, and curriculum design. Because the book employs ethnographic interpretive methods in the classroom, it may also be of use to those interested in qualitative research methods.

Acknowledgments

This book has been strengthened by the advice, assistance, and encouragement of many people, though its weaknesses are all my own. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, my adviser while I was at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, contributed greatly to the doctoral thesis out of which this book evolved. Her insights and criticism were particularly helpful in shaping my classroom portraits. Mary Moore, my close and lifelong friend, spent countless hours helping me conceptualize that earlier piece of work, and her continued support has sustained me throughout the revision process.

The staff, teachers, and students of Facing History and Ourselves have inspired me through the sometimes onerous process of turning my thesis into a book. I wish particularly to thank Marc Skvirsky, for his warmth and continued friendship; Margot Strom, for her vision and commitment to the issues of justice that underlie this curriculum; Steve Cohen, for his dynamic teaching and

humor; and Tracey O'Brien, for supplying me with countless necessary resources. I am greatly indebted to Kathy Greeley and Yolanda Rodriguez, both excellent teachers who generously opened up their classrooms to my prying eyes and ears. This book has been shaped by the insights and concerns of many wonderful students. I have used pseudonyms throughout the book to protect the anonymity of these students, but the fact that they go unnamed here does not mitigate the thanks I owe them all.

Many people helped directly or indirectly with particular parts of this book. Nancy Murray of the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union spoke with me at length about the "Rap About Racism" event I describe in Chapter One. The work of Carol Gilligan and her colleagues contributed to the analysis of students' voices in Chapter Two. Chip Berlet provided the resources and analytical expertise of the Political Research Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which strengthened my discussion of the New Right in Chapters Five and Six. Herbert Kohl supplied useful information about Harold Rugg's controversial social studies curriculum, which I discuss in Chapter Five. And Max McConkey provided important details about Facing History's battle for National Diffusion Network (NDN) funding, which I address in Chapter Six.

I have been nourished by the encouragement and affection of many wonderful friends and family members. Though they are too numerous to name here, they know well their place in my heart.

The sudden death of my father-in-law, Michael Lockman, came during the final months of my work on this project. Misha was an exceptionally generous man whose commitment to helping those in need was motivated in part by his own experience as a Holocaust survivor. He came along with me one day as I observed one of the classes I describe in this book; he was moved by the moral commitment of the Facing History course and was delighted by the energy of its students. My respect for Misha bolsters my conviction that educational programs like this are vital.

While working on this book, my life was blessed by the birth of my daughter, Talya Mara Lockman-Fine. No words can capture the

joy this remarkable little girl has brought me over the past nineteen months. Though I might have finished this book sooner without her, I would have had less fun doing so. I have written this book with Talya in mind, in hopes that her future education will foster her own moral thinking, compassion, and action.

By far my greatest debt goes to my husband, Zachary Lockman, whose assistance on matters great and small helped shape whatever is of value in this book. Though busy writing a book of his own, he agreed to discuss this work with me time and time again, to read and reread every chapter, and to offer much-needed discerning criticism. What is worse, this poor man helped me just as much the first time around, when my work was still in thesis form. He has persevered because he loves me and believes in me; for this I feel extraordinarily lucky.

Boston, Massachusetts
January 1995

MELINDA FINE

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