**Moral Teachers, Moral Students**

Schools can best support students' moral development by helping teachers manage the stresses of their profession and by increasing teachers' capacity for reflection and empathy.

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Once again, the public frets about whether children are becoming good people. Both conservative commentators, such as William Bennett (2000), and researchers, such as William Damon (2001), decry a steady rise in greed, delinquency, and disrespect. And once again, the public holds schools largely responsible for remedying these troubles.

"Solutions" abound. Many character education efforts in schools now focus on everything from community service to teaching students virtues, building good habits, rewarding positive behavior, and developing students' capacity for moral reasoning (Schaps, Schaeffer, & McDonnell, 2001).

There is value in these solutions. Students surely benefit from performing community service, being reminded of important virtues, and practicing good habits.

But we have been wringing our hands and trying these solutions for decades, in some cases for two centuries, without fundamentally changing students' moral prospects. The moral development of students does not depend primarily on explicit character education efforts but on the maturity and ethical capacities of the adults with whom they interact—especially parents, but also teachers, coaches, and other community adults.

Educators influence students' moral development not simply by being good role models—important as that is—but also by what they bring to their relationships with students day to day: their ability to appreciate students' perspectives and to disentangle them from their own, their ability to admit and learn from moral error, their moral energy and idealism, their generosity, and their ability to help students develop moral thinking without shying away from their own moral authority. That level of influence makes being an adult in a school a profound moral challenge. And it means that we will never greatly improve students' moral development in schools without taking on the complex task of developing adults' maturity and ethical capacities. We need to rethink the nature of moral development itself.

## Guiding Students' Moral and Emotional Growth

During the past decade, I have spent much time in schools and talked to many students. I have observed again and again students' exquisite sensitivity to the qualities of their teachers—both their fierce loyalty to the

teachers they trust and their keen alertness to hypocrisy, injustice, and indifference. Research shows that even when schools are massively restructured, students often remain strangely oblivious to new structures and practices. When asked about the strengths and weaknesses of their schools after these reforms, students focus on the strengths and weaknesses of individual teachers (Warren Little, 1998).

In these relationships, moral qualities are shaped. Adults do not simply transmit moral qualities and beliefs to children. These qualities and beliefs emerge and continually evolve in the wide array of relationships that every child has with both adults and peers starting nearly at birth, and in children's felt knowledge of what is harmful, true, or right. In these relationships, children continually sort out, for example, what they owe others, what they should stand for, what traditions are worth keeping, whether to follow rules, how to contribute to their family, classroom, and community—in other words, how to be a decent human being.

Should I tell my teacher when I know another student is lying to her? Do I have to say yes to the girl who invited me over and who doesn't have friends, when I would rather play with another girl I like more? Should I speak my mind about an issue that's important to me, even though I may lose friends?

Fair, generous, caring, and empathetic educators model these qualities and can effectively guide students in sorting out these questions. Often adults are also effective when they express how their own moral questions are related to children's moral questions and when they model how to think through moral issues and dilemmas.

Teacher-student relationships shape students' moral development in another sense—through their influence on students' emotional development. Most of the talk about moral development in school assumes that we can teach students to behave morally by instilling in them virtues and standards, a clear sense of right and wrong. This assumption ignores the fact that emotions are often the horse, values and virtues the rider trying to hang on. Harvard child psychologist Jerome Kagan (1995) observes that violence prevention programs that explain to students the harmful consequences of violence often don't help because "children know violence is wrong—what they can't control is the shame and destructive impulses that fuel violence."

People do not usually lie, cheat, or abuse others because they don't value honesty and respect; more likely, they suffer from feelings of inferiority, cynicism, or egocentrism that blind them to others' feelings. Research suggests that such emotions as shame, anger, and cynicism in particular eat away at caring, a sense of responsibility, and other important moral qualities (Gilligan, 1996; Rozin et al., 1999). When people's moral beliefs conflict with their immoral actions, many will change their beliefs to accommodate their

actions, not vice versa. They will justify stealing, for example, because "society is corrupt" or because "all people are basically self-interested."

## Complex Interactions

What makes matters more complicated is that the influence of teachers and other adults on students' emotional and moral lives goes both ways, in complex reverberations and interactions that are often positive but sometimes clearly destructive. For example, Randall, a 7th grader who gets under everyone's skin, finds himself in a common kind of escalating war with adults. His constant antagonism makes it hard for teachers to see his perspective—one teacher calls him "a jerk," and the principal refers to him in even harsher terms—which makes him step up his provocations, further angering his teachers and the principal. Randall is spinning out of his school community. When I ask him whom he trusts, he holds up a piece of paper that is totally blank.

Often a chain of complex interactions among home, school, and peers shapes students' moral qualities and behavior. Consider Sally, a 10-year-old with Attention Deficit Disorder. Sally has a highly anxious mother and a father prone to spikes of anger. According to her psychologist, Sally is furious with them and isolates herself at home. At school, she has become increasingly disruptive and rude: She wrote on the chalkboard that her teacher is a bitch. Her teacher has little empathy for her, not only because of these attacks but also because she feels harassed and criticized by Sally's mother. At war with both her parents and her teacher, Sally looks to her peers for support. Other students, however, find her needy and rude. Sally becomes more provocative with her teacher, and the spiral continues downward.

## Teachers Who Make a Difference

Many teachers, of course, are effective at identifying and turning around these downward spirals and at promoting key emotional and ethical qualities. Many teachers communicate high moral expectations and provide steady listening and opportunities for accomplishment that reduce students' shame and distrust. Many teachers learn from their own moral errors and continually develop their capacity to see the perspective of every student in their classrooms. I recently talked to a 4th grade teacher who told me that she thinks that a 10-year-old boy in her classroom has a more refined and complex sense of justice than she does—that he is more effective at working out conflicts in the classroom than she is. She said that she tries to learn from him.

I know teachers who work hard to enter the particular moral worlds of students. A high school teacher recently told me about his efforts not to condone but to understand why a student he admired had brought a gun to

school. It turned out that this student went straight from school to work and returned home late at night. On his way home from the bus, he had to walk past a gang that had threatened him several times. Bringing the gun was not an act of provocation but an act of self-defense. This same teacher told me about his struggles to understand the religious orientations that underlie some students' moral thinking. He recalled how vexed a girl in his class became when he related that he did not believe in God. How can I respect your judgment and guidance, the student asked openly, if it is not rooted in a belief in God? The teacher realized the depth of his student's religious feelings. I have observed that other teachers consciously try to take the perspective of the children whom they find most frustrating.

Many teachers and administrators, however, clearly don't possess these qualities—or don't express them in their interactions with students day to day. These teachers and administrators don't reach out to struggling students, don't attempt to see students' perspectives, and have lost their idealism. What gets in the way of adults developing or expressing these qualities? And what can we do about it?

## Depression and Disillusionment

Exact data are difficult to obtain, but I think that disillusionment and depression undermine large numbers of teachers in urban schools. I refer here less to the serious, acute depression that afflicts about 20 percent of U.S. adults (Beardslee, 2002) than to the steady drizzle of helplessness and hopelessness that can wear teachers down.

The litany of stresses that these teachers bear has become well known. They can't get textbooks and other materials; they feel stranded, marooned in their classrooms; they don't get adequate support from administrators; they don't believe that they have the skills to deal with problems that they confront every day. Even those teachers who develop the skills and knowledge to work effectively with individual students often become overwhelmed when they realize what it would take to work effectively with every struggling student in their classroom. "As a human, I may never be up to this," one told me.

A colleague who recently directed an institute for new teachers in Boston believes that new teachers suffer a kind of *learned helplessness*—a term coined by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania—a gradual sense of losing control (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). You can hardly set foot in an urban school these days without also hearing about the burden of managing students with behavior troubles. Some teachers feel physically at risk. One of my former graduate students was hurt while physically restraining a 2nd grade student; another 7-year-old told her that he was going

to kill her. She came into my office in a kind of moral shock, a disbelief that this state of affairs existed. Most teachers have brought to this work their hearts and souls, and many have lost the belief that they can make a real difference in students' lives.

Research documenting what happens to adults when they get depressed may shed light on what happens to teachers who feel this chronic sense of helplessness and become burned out. Depressed adults often become unilateral and commanding in their interactions with other people. Their behavior tends to be governed by their own moods and needs rather than by an awareness of others. They tend to take the path of least resistance and do what requires the least effort. Often they become withdrawn, irritable, critical, or sometimes outright hostile (McLoyd, 1990). What's hard for them are exactly the qualities—empathy, patience, persistence, consistency, idealism—that are crucial for teachers to shepherd students' moral growth.

## Misconceptions about Adults' Moral Development

Yet there may be a bigger obstacle to adults developing important moral qualities, and that obstacle is a fundamental cultural misconception about the nature of adults' moral lives. Most adults, including most teachers, don't view themselves as engaged in their own moral growth. We have the peculiar notion that our moral natures are established by late childhood—and that as adults, we simply live out the die that is cast.

Yet new models of adult development suggest that adults' ethical qualities do not remain static at all—they zigzag depending on many factors (Noam, 1995). Some adults become more generous and compassionate over time; others become more selfish. Some adults become wiser, more able to distill important moral truths; others' notions of fairness become more formulaic or coarse. Many people lose their moral enthusiasms. Every stage of adulthood brings both new moral weaknesses and new moral strengths.

This capacity for change means that the typical adult has not reached his or her moral potential. King Lear does not develop compassion or a mature sense of justice until he nears death. Schools face the challenge of creating cultures in which teachers come to view appreciating and being generous to others, acting with fairness and integrity, and formulating mature and resilient ideals as evolving and subtle capacities. "There is nothing noble in being superior to somebody else," civil rights leader Whitney Young says. "The only real nobility is in being superior to your former self."

Much of what passes for character education in schools simply has no influence on adults' emotional or moral qualities. The constant exhortations that teachers receive to become better role models generate by themselves neither the internal commitments nor the external guidance and support that

teachers need to develop these qualities. Minimally, an effective moral education effort would include specific strategies for helping adults deal with disillusionment and helplessness and would focus on creating a culture that supports teachers in their emotional and moral growth.

## Toward Effective Moral Education

Schools clearly can't respond to all the troubles that lead to helplessness and hopelessness in teachers. But they can focus on two prime causes: the strain of dealing with students with behavior troubles; and isolation.

Many schools now put a priority on helping teachers work with students with behavior problems, not only because these problems are so fraying to teachers but also because the problems undercut the learning of all students in the classroom. Happily, programs exist to help teachers deal effectively with these students. The best give teachers specific strategies and break down teachers' isolation, creating stronger, more caring school communities. An example is the Child Development Project, an elementary school program designed, implemented, and evaluated by the Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, California (Battistich et al., 1991). Among the many supports provided, teachers learn effective discipline strategies and receive help in developing students' intrinsic motives to act constructively and cooperatively, including engaging students in rule setting, decision making, and problem solving. Over the past four years, I have worked in two Boston elementary schools with Robert Selman, Bethany Montgomery, and Alison Auderieth on a similar project, which trains a diverse cadre of graduate students to work with schools on these goals.

Schools might also assist in getting the small number of teachers suffering from serious depression into treatment. Such treatment has dramatically improved in the past 25 years (Beardslee, 2002). I am certainly not suggesting that school administrators identify depressed teachers and pressure them into getting therapy. But schools could play a much bigger role by participating in the National Institute of Mental Health's ongoing public education campaign on depression awareness and screening, including using posters and other materials to inform both parents and teachers about the symptoms of depression and about treatment resources.

Although a mountainous literature exists on depression, psychologists have remarkably little understanding of dis-illusionment. They don't even have a vocabulary for talking about it. But disillusionment—especially the loss of a belief that they can make a difference in students' lives—is one of the biggest reasons that nearly one-half of teachers in the United States leave the profession within their first five years (*Education Week*, 2001). Disillusionment is not necessarily bad. Strictly speaking, disillusionment is freedom from

illusion. It is the ability to face and absorb a greater portion of reality—a foundation for wisdom and maturity. But disillusionment turns pernicious when it slides into helplessness and passivity—when teachers don't have the confidence, support, or opportunities for the creativity needed to master these realities.

There is a great deal of talk these days about stronger, more coherent mentoring programs for new teachers, and these new programs are vital for helping teachers work through disillusionment. Mentors can assist teachers in developing their competence and talents, but they can also be responsive to teachers at precisely those moments when new teachers' images and expectations about teaching collide with difficult realities. Mentors can help new teachers be realistic and take pride in seemingly small accomplishments.

Mentors can also help new teachers think about creative, diverse career paths within the teaching profession that might enable them to use their talents and have a larger impact on students' lives. Research suggests that using their talents and growing professionally are significantly more important than status or salary in boosting teachers' morale (Heath, 1994). A growing chorus of educators and researchers now call for revamping teachers' career opportunities to allow teachers to become innovative and entrepreneurial— for example, enabling them to start their own programs, conduct research, take sabbaticals in the private sector, or assume leadership roles.

Such changes as these should be one piece of a broad effort to support both teachers' ethical growth and their ability to guide students' ethical growth. New modes of professional development focused on improving instruction can teach us much in this regard. District 2 in New York, for example, has attracted attention for revamping professional development so that teachers regularly observe and reflect on one another's practice. Veteran professionals with expertise in such important content areas as literacy also coach teachers.

School districts need to do much more to promote professional cultures that focus on both academic instruction and developing adults' ethical awareness and skills. Teachers, guided by coaches, could provide feedback to one another on such topics as earning respect and trust, creating a caring community, dealing with challenging students, and identifying and reversing the downward spirals in which students and adults get caught.

Teachers need opportunities to reflect on why they have difficulty empathizing with particular students, on their successes and failures in cultivating students' moral thinking, and on the state of their own ideals. Teachers need emotional support from their colleagues in dealing with chronic stress. And administrators need to learn the art of creating opportunities for this emotional support without turning schools into the kinds of therapeutic cultures that would estrange many teachers.

None of this, of course, will be easy. But it doesn't have to be yet another task for schools already burdened with the hard work of improving instruction. Much of the work can be done in the context of what schools should be doing anyway to support new teachers and to promote good instruction, and much of it—creating strong communities, helping teachers manage students with behavior problems, increasing adults' capacity for reflection—will certainly serve academic goals. Best of all, this approach, unlike so many current character education efforts, stands a real chance of nurturing in children the qualities that they need to become caring and responsible adults.

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