

Individual Freedom amidst Diversity: Moral Education, Democracy, and Virtues in the 21st Century:

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ABSTRACT

As students develop their identities, they commonly grapple with the fundamental concept of how to use their educational skills in virtuous ways. Meanwhile, teachers wrestle with the significant questions such as "What is moral education? How should morality be taught amidst diversity?" This paper aims to seek understanding on different approaches that school leaders use to develop citizens who are able to balance their own sense of individual moral integrity against communal moral norms. Next, I deconstruct the notion of moral education in 21st century schools. The act of indoctrination is also explored to offer examples of this principle in relation to individual freedom. Moral education, thus construed, can find ways to respect diversity and maintain individual freedom

Keywords: *Moral education, Democracy, Virtue Ethics, Citizenship, Social Justice*

Our whole life is startling moral

There is never an instant's truce

Between virtue and vice.

--Henry David Thoreau

Imagine a school where no moral rules of honesty or responsibility existed, and teachers or students' only goal was mastery of intellectual content. Moral education becomes critical because we cannot assume students will use their educational skills for beneficial or virtuous purposes after the school bells stop. If we are to increase morality in schools, educational leaders should have a clear understanding of the many different ways that "moral education" can be conceived. They should understand what education means in a democratic polity. Furthermore, leaders should have a conception of how the issues surrounding moral education in a democratic state are different in a religious school than in a public or secular one. It is also important for educational leaders to be able to differentiate between moral education and moral indoctrination. By having such knowledge, then, school leaders can subsequently develop citizens who are able to balance their own sense of individual moral integrity against communal moral norms.

First, I would like to unpack the concept of moral education in a democratic polity. This notion supports students to understand and acquire universal principals for the ultimate goal of civic action. These universal-ethical principles, according to Kohlberg (1975), are not considered as absolute moral laws. On the contrary, universal rules are abstract. Some examples include principles of justice or respect for each human being's dignity. Moral education cannot be limited as instruction related to desired conduct of good or bad because authentic morality can even transcend contemporary society's belief system. Therefore, democratic society requires citizens to question and be willing to act for change. Moral education in a democratic polity facilitates citizen formation with the aim of action on how we can live respectfully together in a diverse society.

UNDERSTANDING MORAL EDUCATION

Due to contending perspectives, moral education must be further clarified. I am considering moral education in a democratic polity as any form of study that conscientiously and critically examines civic responsibility within our society. Moral education can include any content area with themes of virtue, such as compassion, strength, truthfulness, duties, etc.

One advantage of focusing on living virtuously does acknowledge rules, yet this approach does not rely on the entire moral life to rules. Also, understanding and learning on virtue allows students to focus on the sorts of persons whom we would like to be; that is, we are how we act. Certain school subjects may be more inclined to explore virtue ethics to concrete quandaries of diverse, contemporary society. Although some implicit assumptions might be to mainly draw on subjects like history or literature, moral education is not limited to any specific discipline.

For instance, moral education could even include schools that are willing to critique narrowed academic emphasis (Meier, 1995), or even primary education classes that are willing to confront patterns of bullying and exclusion (Paley, 1992). In an increasing globalized world, youth should have the educational skills in order to be aware, accountable, and active citizens. On the one hand, social studies can be frequently viewed as a subject conducive for evaluating civic responsibilities in our American society. On the other hand, all learning environments can have rich moral contexts and can be examined for ethical meanings and implications (Martin, 2002). Moral education can happen in any discipline or environment, and it is important to acknowledge meaningful issues of civic life with particular regards for fairness and welfare.

MORE CONSIDERATIONS: FOUR ISSUES IN MORAL EDUCATION

Moral Reasoning and Habits

One particular issue in thinking clearly about moral education in a democratic polity is that there is a contradiction at democracy's core: democracy requires moral reasoning and habits with consistent execution from the citizens. However, it also exists with a conceptual framework of liberty. Citizens can choose to pursue one's interest and not participate in tasks of democratic citizens. These tasks, which citizens can neglect since they are not mandatory obligations, might include voting, town meetings, and community volunteer work. Martin (2011) contends, "The education of a democratic citizenry—that is to say, the making and shaping of democratic citizens—is arguably the most important task a democratic society has" (p. 139). I would like to expand on Martin's statement about the teaching priority of democracy to students.

To illustrate further, current classrooms in which traditional approaches focus on teachers instructing moral education in a democratic polity through examples, speeches, and theoretical sources are failing (Kunzman, 2006). Indeed, today's character education somehow conveys a superficial, values-approach that blatantly disregards differences among people's convictions and the importance of context in moral reasoning. Kunzman claims we have been unsuccessful, with which I might personally agree, and expresses clearly, "In summary, the effort to address morality in *abstraction* from deeper ethical sources has *also* failed" (p. 32). Education must genuinely push children to examine and develop critical habits of reasoning. Some of the main foundations of public discourse are reasoning, deliberating, and exchanging thoughts about moral topics together as a democratic community (Gutmann, 1987). Therefore, the mentoring of young citizens to develop strong moral habits to be conscientious participants is a necessary community responsibility for moral education in a democratic polity.

Social Membership

Second, another issue surrounding moral education in a democratic state would be the differences between a religious school and a public school. Religious schools are allowed to directly and wholeheartedly embrace moral education, while public schools seem to rely on a rather shallow values-oriented approach. In fact, most parochial schools can openly embody the ideas of discipline and moral habits, which are salient democratic traits. This process of consistent discipline and strong moral habits is complicated because we, as children, must work and consciously choose to acquire beneficial habits. Aristotle (Irwin Translation, 1999) in *Nicomachean Ethics* notes, "That is why we must perform the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth." He vehemently declares, "On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important" (p. 19). Religious schools are vehicles to drive specific moral habits into their students. Discipline becomes a key feature for parochial students, who must take part in Church traditions.

Durkheim (lecture notes 1902-1903, published 2002)), in accordance with Aristotle, observes

discipline as a powerful component of moral education. He adds that social membership is an important component as well. However, he acknowledges a caveat: “To act morally, it is not enough—above all it is no longer enough—to respect discipline and be committed to the group.” These two components would assume that all groups and communities have complete agreement on positive values. Durkheim further explains, “Beyond this, and whether out of deference to a rule or devotion to a collective ideal, we must have knowledge, as clear and complete an awareness as possible of the reasons for our conduct. This consciousness confers on our behavior the autonomy that the public conscience from now on requires of every genuinely and completely moral being” (p. 120). This autonomy would be the true advantage of a public education. Children are allowed in this public sphere to be openly different, rather than forced conformity to the belief system of a religious school. Public school’s moral education in a democratic polity, on this view, would be conducive to different people working together to fulfill their human purpose. Indeed, students’ education could understand where they came from with the intention to understand where we are going and draw upon a classical concept of the Greek “polis” (MacIntyre, 1981). Students could be involved in public discourse and work towards the good of the entire learning community, and the concept of Durkheim’s autonomy does become another important component of moral education in a democratic polity.

Perhaps the balance of discipline, membership, and autonomy are the main issues surrounding religious schools and public schools. Religious schools seemingly place sincere emphasis on discipline and membership, yet lack individual’s clear thinking. In opposition, public schools focus on autonomy without much foundation in the areas of discipline and membership. Since most Americans attend public schools, it seems fitting that we now have a society with what I will call “alienation to the public sphere” due to our neglect for discipline and connection with community. Society is in an alarming state of disconnect (Putnam, 2000). Recall that community schooling was historically due to both secular and moral reasons as all students had the King James Bible, Protestant-dominated views, as a reading staple. In the fabric of moral education, there has always been the issue of religion. Why does any religion have to be a taboo public school topic? In my opinion, we

should not “divide the seamless coat of learning” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 11) for all subjects of a person’s life. Whitehead states, “The essence of education is that it be religious. Pray what is religious education? A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence” (p. 14). In my understanding, I do not believe that Whitehead is literally speaking of religious education classes, but how all education should be sacred and should be open for applicable moral purposes. By uniting moral habits, social membership, and clear knowledge, private and public schools could aid all education to be “religious,” in the sense that students find their learning as sacred and connected to all people.

Education versus Indoctrination

Third, it is important for educational leaders to differentiate between moral education and moral indoctrination. Moral education does entail the freedom to be different or question. Moral indoctrination has the connotation of obeying and unquestioning. Educators should strive for a moral education approach instead of complete moral indoctrination. Nel Noddings’ (1983) definition of moral education reads, “It [moral education] refers to education which is moral in the sense that those planning and conducting education will strive to meet all those involved morally; and it refers to an education that will enhance the ethical ideal of those being educated so that they will continue to meet others morally” (p. 171). The ethic of care is a premise of her definition for moral education. Although I do agree with her concept of feelings being fundamental to moral education, I respectfully disagree with her emphasis of meeting all those involved with care. What about those who are not involved? Or people who will never be involved? Moral education transcends to people who we will never meet, but with which we still desire to protect the dignity of each and every person despite gender, race, sexual orientation, class, etc. Moral indoctrination seemingly focuses on the current loyalty to the belief system of present-time groups. True moral education, unlike moral indoctrination, certainly cares about the world’s ancestors before us and descendants after we are long gone, as we value the people of the past to critically understand and improve for the future of all generations.

I would like to clarify further what moral indoctrination can be with a couple examples from nonfiction and fiction. As a girl, I read the

story of the Catholic Church and Galileo and pondered how someone could publically recant his beliefs. When I read the phrase “moral indoctrination,” an epiphany occurred for I immediately recalled the story of Galileo. In brief, Galileo had discovered that the Earth was not the center of the universe as the Church instructed. In his mind and truthfully so, the sun must be the center of the universe as planets orbit around it. When he wrote about the sun as the center, the Church made him formally recant.

In disbelief, readers may not initially fathom why he would just obediently agree with the church, even as he allegedly was muttering under his breath, “Yet it still moves.” The image has stayed with me, and I firmly believe that moral indoctrination endeavors to keep authority and power hierarchy by the community not questioning the instruction. Due to this moral indoctrination, Galileo was forbidden to write anymore and was placed under house arrest. He did prove his loyalty by fulfilling these punishments, but this story in a clear example how moral indoctrination can fail us, in my opinion. Another story is the famous Greek tragedy of Antigone. Sadly, Antigone’s brother is killed in a controversial battle, and she is told by the community leaders that her brother cannot have a traditional burial. She fears for her brother’s after life, and feels he deserves the dignity of a proper burial. Her personal self-perception is dedicated to a greater purpose than just the current human laws. It could be her religious views, or perhaps it could be the devotion as a sister, I can surely relate on both, that would push this otherwise obedient girl to bury her beloved brother against the law. While choosing her role as a sister, she might feel shameful in her role as a citizen (McFall, 1987), but her conscience is loyal to the ethical principle. So moral indoctrination, in relation to both stories, gives human authority the ultimate power. Moral education, however, puts the holding power in the concept and application of the universal principle.

Moral education cherishes differences, which moral indoctrination seeks uniform thinking to the code. Some codes might be worthy, but individuals should be able to critically assess the purpose of the code and not rely solely on the reinforcement from the community (Anderson, 1999). Is it a worthy cause to be a member of this code? In fact, the word moral comes from a Latin root (*moris, mos*), and the translation

means “code or customs of the people.” Students or members of any code should be able to celebrate different ways of lives. Good schools and systems are able to cherish and perhaps most importantly protect diversity (Meier, 1995). A code might be what Plato (Grube Translation, 1992) in the *Republic* had in mind when he writes about the metaphor of the cave (514b). The cave represents the distinction to appearances and reality. People are chained down in the cave, and even if one person managed to free himself, no one would even believe him because they cannot think past their situation in the cave. The Sun represents enlightenment, and I find this analogy parallels to a degree the earlier story of Galileo. Even if reality is there, people must stick to the known, uniform code of thinking with moral indoctrination. In many ways, moral education lets people learn their identity in their freedom to be different. There is no need, Gutmann (1987) believes, to keep children constrained to a uniform way of life:

Either we must educate children so that they are free to choose among the widest range of lives (given the constraints of cultural coherence) because freedom of choice is the paramount good, or we must educate children so that they will choose *the* life that we believe is best because leading a virtuous life is the paramount good. (p. 36)

A virtuous life may include breaking away from the traditional code. This can be seen when people feel further fulfilled by leaving the faith they always grew up and believed. Since moral education, in contrast to moral indoctrination, involves providing children with the choice to decide their own good and virtuous life.

Balancing It All

Fourth, by moral knowledge, school leaders can develop citizens who are able to balance their own sense of individual moral integrity against communal moral norms. With moral education in a democratic polity, there exists a complex relationship between individualism and community. Democratic citizens should seek authenticity with respect to diverse backgrounds and the natural world. An individual’s sincere beliefs may be important. Nonetheless, genuine authenticity recognizes connections with a more extensive social meaning. The wider-community of civic duties should not be abandoned for private-life indulgences. Individualism can ignore history as unimportant or disregard the demands

of citizenship. Charles Taylor (1991) points out how individualism has a narrow, dark side, in which many people lose the ability to think broadly about how their actions and beliefs affect others. So valid morality involves thinking outside of one's self for communal good. Consequently, we have to wonder how many people withdraw from the greater society to live only with friends and family with similar thinking. We face the "alienation from the public sphere" as most people choose only to associate with people like themselves. Once again, with this narrowing individualism, we risk forgetting about our predecessors, and we may even be in danger of forgetting our descendants. I would like to explore the concept of individualism with a few statistics.

As suggested previously, Individual moral integrity has to exist amidst the public conscience. But individualism seems to be a concept that could undo democratic communities. Putnam (2000) contends "civil society" is disconnected as Americans become more severed from families, neighbors, communities, and even our own sense of being a republic. A republic, yet, depends on a state in which the people and their elected representatives are aware and accountable. Interestingly enough, Putnam shares quantitative data that shows employed people are actually more civically and socially active than those who do not work at all. Also, people who worked longer hours and had heaviest time pressures were most likely to be active in community projects, to attend club meetings, and have social involvements (p. 191). One shocking study even discovered that people with two jobs are even more inclined to volunteer than a person with one job (p. 191). It appears people who are disciplined with their own times are disciplined in giving time back to community causes as well. Furthermore, it also appears that education becomes critical to people as they balance individual interests and community duties. Putnam states, "Education is one of the most important predictors—usually in fact, *the* most important predictor—of many forms of social participation—from voting to associational membership, to chairing a local committee to hosting a dinner party to giving blood" (p. 186). Moral education takes on important meaning when one looks at the obligations to both individual freedom and the democratic community.

CONCLUSION

The Aim of Social Justice

So the uncomfortable truth about individual freedom is that cultural, racial, and ethical differences will always exist among us, and every person will interpret our American laws as just or unjust according to particular beliefs. Thus, how should democratic citizens act when faced with an unjust law? King wrote "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" about social injustice when he was confined to jail on April 16, 1963. He explains how sometimes civil disobedience is necessary to force a wider community to acknowledge unjust issues:

One who breaks the law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law. (para 20)

King argues that we have moral obligations to disobey unjust laws, especially ones which discriminate against groups of people. If we choose to allow suffering to others, then we are accepting of communal injustice. A person's interpretation should always trigger some form of action. Some might argue that action is not a necessary component of a democratic citizen. Still, I firmly emphasize that action is always a fundamental part of interpreting laws. We, as a society, should pay attention to the impact of various laws and continuously work towards social justice. This breaking of laws would be the individual moral integrity striving to bring the communal moral norms in harmony with valid justice.

Therefore, moral education in any school becomes a necessary task because an implicit assumption is students will always use their educational skills for virtuous purposes. If we are to increase morality in schools, educational leaders should have a clear understanding of how "moral education" can be conceived. They should understand what education means for a democratic society's future. Moreover, leaders should have a conception of how the issues surrounding moral education in a democratic state are different in a religious school than in a public or secular one; it is also becomes critical for educational leaders to be able to differentiate between moral education and moral indoctrination. School leaders can develop

citizens who are able to balance their own sense of individual moral integrity against communal moral norms as a goal of moral education in a democratic polity.

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