Moral Development and Moral Education

Piaget, Kohlberg, and Beyond

THOMAS LICKONA

1. The Case for Moral Education in the Schools

Convincing people that moral education deserves a high place on the public-school agenda was once an uphill battle, but now American advocates of moral education are surrounded by an embarrassment of supportive evidence. Fresh scandals break with such numbing regularity that the list grows almost too long to remember: Watergate, international sabotage by the CIA, domestic spying by the FBI, assorted corruption in Congress, routine bribery in big business, widespread fraud in Medicare, another rash of cheating at a military academy, reports of premed students destroying each other’s lab work, and steady increases in almost every category of crime.

The public schools, faithful to their role as microcosms of society, reflect the moral malaise at large. For the last six years, the Gallup Poll of Attitudes toward Education has named discipline the number one problem in the schools. Such a verdict is not merely the complaint of teachers...
or parents who want their children to sit still and be quiet. An even higher percentage of high school juniors and seniors, tired of theft, classroom disruption, gang beatings, and shakedowns in the washrooms, ranked discipline as the most serious problem facing their schools. Testimony given to the U. S. Senate Subcommittee on Violence and Vandalism in the Schools (Today’s Child, 1975) suggests the dimensions of the problem:

The cost of vandalism, arson, and theft in America’s public schools is now estimated at 500 million dollars each year, a sum comparable to the entire national annual expenditure for textbooks.

There were 100 murders in American schools during a three-year period in the 1970s; approximately 70,000 teachers are attacked each year during the course of their work, and hundreds of thousands of students are assaulted every year.

Students in some schools are operating flourishing narcotics, prostitution, and extortion rings.

How all of this affects day-to-day education is graphically conveyed by a teacher’s letter to Today’s Education, describing what was once an excellent high school in Detroit:

Absenteeism on a typical day runs from 30 to 40 percent—or more. Hallways are congested with students after classes have supposedly begun. Students are free to enter classes any time they wish. . . . Increasing numbers of brazen students and nonstudents challenge staff members with threats and obscenities. Teachers’ purses are snatched—even in the classroom. Fires, smoke bombs, knifings and shootings within the building have become common occurrences. In recent weeks two students have been shot and killed at two Detroit high schools, one of these killings at my wife’s school. These worsening conditions have resulted in extremely low staff morale. (March–April, 1975, p. 26)

Not all schools have disintegrated into this kind of moral jungle. Many of them, critics charge, are still doing their job of socialization all too well, demanding and getting uncritical conformity to the dictates of authority. Two psychologists (Hainey and Zimbardo, 1975) recently drew parallels between high schools and prisons. Both institutions, they observed, subject their clientele to endless regimentation and regulation such as how long they may wear their hair and when they may go to the bathroom. In schools as in prisons, power is in the hands of the authorities. Students do not complain about unfair teachers because, as one student said, “No matter how bad it is, you’re gonna end up worse than you started” (p. 30). Prison guards turn inmates against one