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Final Paper

Character education and Critical Thinking.

Introduction

Moral education as a school subject requires a specific level of understanding. This is the power as well as the problem with teaching it in a formal classroom. The discussion of whether an educator should teach morality is a very controversial. The critical thinking aspect of moral education is either directly included or extremely hypocritical depending on the discourse.

Character education has emerged as the leading term for school efforts to implement programmes in the area of moral values, ethics and citizenship education (Lickona, 1996, para. 2). The definitions are different but the idea behind differentiating morals education is not the focus of this essay so character education, and moral education will be used in a way to describe the act of teaching morality for a certain end goals.

Character education teaches moral reasoning. The only other main definition will be on critical thinking. The oxford dictionary defines critical thinking as “the [objective HYPERLINK "http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/analysis" analysis](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/objective) and [evaluation](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/evaluation) of an issue in order to form a [judgement](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/judgement).” Attention should be given to the reflective dynamic as moral education may either be beneficial or detrimental.

Character education will be explored through the philosophy of Thomas Lickona who argues that morality education should be taught in schools as it will directly teach students right from wrong. Lickona will explain how character education will look like, what the school’s job is to reinforce the morality growth and offer the plentiful benefits to society.This article will then contrast the ideas of David Purpel who argues that moral education is historically out of date, benefits are to the ones who set the structure and solutions offered are closed ended. Finally, the work of Dwight Boyd will put context into the hypocrisy of moral education by questioning the prescribed roles of individuals, and the problems with teaching moral education as critical thinking. This article will then expand on the idea that teaching moral education is not only redundant but may also be harmful to individual students because it may persuade a student to think of how to approach a problem and yet disregard behavior.

Thomas Lickona

   Lickona is an advocate of teaching objectively important core ethical values such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility and respect for self-morals looks like (Lickona, 1996, para. 10).Words have meanings and if there is nothing to confirm them then the school system is failing the students and society. The words themselves may have multiple meanings for example, one student may believe responsibility is to perform well in school so they can get into university. Another student may think responsibility is to do well in sports. A different student may think they only to find a job and provide for their family. Lickona may argue moral education will try to synchronise the different meanings behind words simply by teaching a thinking process that involves a moral lense. By connecting the dots, decisions by way of morality education, will benefit schools and society.

   This is done by adopting Lickona's recommendations. Some examples include developing intrinsic motivation, evaluation of character education, opportunities for moral action (Lickona, 1996). By following his eleven steps, it will teach what good morality looks like as well as what bad looks like. A moral curriculum will help students make moral decisions a matter of obligation; teaching it will make educators accountable for their actions by creating an effect thought process (Lickona, 1996, para. 11). Useful and critical skills of reversibility ("Would you want to be treated this way?") and universalizability ("Would you want all people to act this way in a similar situation?") are important when contemplating behaviors (Lickona, 1996, para. 11). Students with proper character education can look at themselves through a “bigger picture” perspective and see how virtually everything that goes on in, school affects the people around them (Lickona, 1996, para. 11).

   For the best effect, a school should find and protect time for staff and students to reflection on moral matters (Lickona, 1996, para. 21). School staff and students through faculty meetings and smaller support groups, should be regularly asking: What positive and negative, character-building experiences is the school already providing for its students? (Lickona, 1996, para. 21). Another effective method may have schools gathering data on various character-related behaviours like “has student attendance gone up? Have fights and suspensions gone down? Has vandalism declined? Have drug incidents diminished,” (Lickona, 1996, para. 21)?

    In terms of School environments, educators needs to looks at students critically in three domains of character (knowing, feeling and behaviour)(Lickona, 1996, para. 21).  This can be accomplished with anonymous questionnaires that measure student moral judgement ("Is cheating on a test wrong?"), moral commitment ("Would you cheat if you were sure you wouldn't get caught?") and self-reported moral behaviour ("How many times have you cheated on a test or major assignment in the past year?") (Lickona, 1996, para. 21).

The main idea for Licknoa is everything has a moral factor with in school life (Lickona, 1996, para. 13) and it should not be ignored but explored through active “critical thinking” through a moral lens. This questioning is the job of the teacher to think about students direct or indirectly. Critical thinking is thus an integral part of moral education for student, teacher and school.

   Advocates of character education believe that the directness of moral education offers the most promising response to the social-moral problems that come with modern societies (Lickona, 1996, para 2). Schools are better places for everyone involved when character education is involved; it celebrates moral growth yet holds students and staff accountable to the values on which good character is based on (Lickona, 1996, para 4). When schools are in line with character education, benefits transcend the individual student or the schools, it creates a better society.

   Character education is “essential to the task of building a moral society” (Lickona, 1996, para 5). Problems like “breakdown of the family, physical and sexual abuse of children... teen pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, sexually transmitted disease, marital infidelity, and the destructive psychological consequences of sex without commitment... stem from the breakdown of sexual morality and the loss of respect for human life” (Lickona, 1996, para 5). Teaching moral education is important because the benefits to the students, teachers and society are worth fighting.

David Purpel

    Purpel believes that moral education is troublesome to the discourse of education as he argues, "schools are blamed for not "teaching values" and families are blamed for teaching the wrong ones, (Purpel, 1999, 83). The systems in place are open to critiques and objections from parents, adults and educators but character educations tend to silence the students. Schools are places where academic education should thrive but there is also a hidden agenda. Purpel argues that character education is historically out of date, regulators of the morality growth is problematic and the beneficiaries can end important discussions.

   Historically speaking, Purpel argues that early American governments used moral education to "create a vision of America which seemingly integrates moral, religious, political, economic, social, and cultural perspectives seamlessly" (Purpel, 1999, 84).

The powers in play were trying to create a state run perfect society (Purpel, 1999, 84).  The belief was that a common curriculum was the answer to the worries over national solidarity, social stability, and cultural purity (Purpel, 1999, 84). Educations in early American institutions wanted to use school to create a framework which benefits society through a singular vision of American way of life.

   A modern take on education sees a separation of church and culture favoritism by government sectors; this reflects the changing discourse of education cultures along with the realities of a pluralistic society (Purpel, 1999, 84). A progressive curriculum would see the inclusion of all cultures, beliefs and backgrounds. Purpel would suggest that modern character education would be a step back into a time when education was a tool to teach “puritan traditions of obedience, hierarchy, and hard work” (Purpel, 1999, 89). This monoculture agenda permeates throughout character education.

   Lickona believes that thinking in general should involve moral reasoning. The assumption with Lickona’s thinking is that everything everyone does have a morality aspect (Lickona, 1996, para. 11). One may ask if there is no value-free education, which values will educators teach and if schools are already engaged in values education, then why is there even a discourse about teaching it (Purpel, 1999, 84)? Purpel's answer would be that teaching character education in certain ways benefits certain peoples.

   In the classroom, a teacher may benefit from character education because good morals may mirror good classroom management techniques. If schools behaved as described by lickona’s ideology, then teachers have a job to question students and students have a job to act a certain way. For example, if a student misbehaves then they simply lack respect. These moral lessons can be viewed as tools to make students obedient, which in Lickona’s argument, would benefits society. There is no thinking involved for the student other than to appease the teacher.

The self-prescribed role of the teacher is to be the dominate beneficiary. If the student is not correct on their Lickona style questionnaire, they must be corrected. Purpel would argue it is “troublesome when (moral education) is exercised by those who seem to have a particularly sophisticated understanding of how values impinge powerfully and pervasively on all aspects of schooling” (Purpel, 1999, 84).

   Purpel tells a story in which an army that is winning a war, but has not yet won, calls for an end to battle based on “increase in such admirable qualities as civility, deference to the community, stability, and orderliness”(Purpel, 1999, 94). If the opposing force agrees then the peace act only "serves to consolidate the gains and authority of those already in power as it will bring an end to the discourses" (Purpel, 1999, 94). There is no more analysis or criticism; the battle is over.

Peace is used to“distract attention from the potentially disruptive substantive critique of established social institutions” (Purpel, 1999, 94). In the realm of a critical thinker, the discourse should never end as the objective vision would dictate that there is no end goal.The character education movement represents an ideological that seeks an end as its goal (Purpel, 1999, 83).

    The “productive yet misleading discourse has gone almost unchallenged only adds to the tragedy of the near impossibility of engaging the students in serious and thoughtful debate and dialogue on complex, sensitive, and vital matters” (Purpel, 1999, 87). Teachers as teachers and students as students along with their prescribed roles has historically been a tool for certain people to benefit in the name of society. This “discourse” between a teacher and student is not in line with objective critical thinking.

Dwight Boyd

Boyd argues that there are major assumptions with moral education. He argues that “it is extremely problematic to conflate character education and citizenship education in a manner that fails to see them as inherently different in important ways…(yet character education tries to) produce both the good person and the good citizen”(Boyd, 2010, 384).   It is extremely problematic to conflate character education with citizenship education as equal yet advocates like Lickona’s views on “general purpose” morality as a healthy development towards a better society. The main assumption, in terms of critical thinking, is the citizens has a “distinct social role”(Boyd, 2010, 384). The compulsory “virtues” of morality characterizes citizens as having certain roles that need to be fills this society can effectively function (Boyd, 2010, 385).

Boyd analysis on Lickona’s main argument can be condensed to “we just know what has to go on the list of virtues that everybody should be taught, and that should always guide all behavior” (Boyd, 2010, 384), and “if someone disagrees they are just wrong… (and it is) good for (them) whether we know it or not.” (Boyd, 2010, 385).This ideology is in line with Purpel’s war and peace metaphor as Boyd argues that moral education will  “disenfranchise a significant portion of the body politic by letting some citizens views of what constitutes the “correct” interpretation of the “good person” override those of others “(Boyd, 2010, 384).

The process of picking and prescribing morals are often misguided. Boyd critiques the Ontario board of education as they collaborated with parents, students, educators, business people, social services, police, and faith communities to create a character list (Boyd, 2010, 386). The “representatives” were then tasked to choose from a list of words and when everyone agreed (if anyone disagreed, it was removed from the list) a set of standards is created (Boyd, 2010, 387). The words and meanings are irrelevant as the critique of the method reflect Purpel’s idea that the framework benefits those that rule the decision making process (Boyd, 2010, 387)

The clause about removing morals from the list because not everyone voted for it is disturbing. By hiding disagreement, it promotes a kind of willful blindness. For example, a teacher may comprise a student's argument or agreements simply because they were talking without a respectful tone of voice. The teacher has the final say. Again this is similar to the Purpel example of war ending prematurely because a call for peace is a end of the discussion. By teaching morality without recognizing and questioning the motives and the process, students will lack the capacity to function in critical and objectives ways thus promoting an increase in the risk of mono-culturalism (Boyd, 2010, 389).

       There are limited moral frameworks available for teachers to use to facilitate the development of a student’s capacity to recognize, critique, and imagine alternatives to contemporary views of the morally good. An attempt to make a structure with political cooperation that is free of bias, but at the same time, expresses an overlapping consensus that all citizens can agree is ultimately impossible (Boyd, 2010, 390). This is where critical thinking without a moral lens can be used to reinforcing what a person may believe in.

Discussion

   Moral reasoning and critical thinking should not be taught in a similar manner. Morality education may teach a rather closed ended dichotomy of good, bad or somewhere in-between but to not teach it can be just as dangerous. To teach moral education and to get the best results in terms of student growth, a teacher would need to teach to the maximum effectiveness of moral lessons from Lickona's ideology, the historical faults explained by Purpel and the exclusiveness of the process told by Boyd. The benefits would be for the students as they can understand the framework from multiple perspectives.

       The critical thinking aspects of moral education is often explained as beneficial to students but it is oversimplified. For example, a pregnant teenage student may not understand her current situation so she may seek advice. A critical thinker may tell this student that the economic system, social class structure, political hierarchy and/or popular culture may have influenced a series of events which lead to the pregnancy (Purpel, 1999, 90).

       Yet, maybe in a character education model, she showed a lack of major morals which may have caused this situation. Lickona may expand that the root cause “could stem from the breakdown of sexual morality and the loss of respect for human life” (Lickona, 1996, para 5). To compare and contrast the weakness, Critical thinking could be muddled with too many factors that may be irrelevant to the current situation. The prognosis and prescription methods of moral education are not only be condescending but assumptions on behaviors are misrepresent as random and predictable guesses.

       Lickona likes to think of character development is an all-encompassing method that is inclusive to reflection on the problems and the solutions (Lickona, 1996, para 5). Moral education would say that every action and reaction can be seen moving in a certain direction. Every action is being monitored by yourself or someone else.  In the classroom, a teacher may talk to the pregnant student and lecture them on consequences and punishments. There is a prescribed method of teaching a student and through systematic correction, learning is achieved. Purpel and Boyd would have a problem with this perceived incomplete answers to complex problem.

    As boyd describes the morality lessons are dangerous because the students have no real input (Boyd, 2010, 388). There are no alternatives, either the morals are flowing in a positive or negative direction in terms of growth. The moral lens would see a person not as a human but as a vessel that is evil, good or something in-between. A sociopath may think of benefiting himself while acting in a way that benefits other. They may act in a morally correct manner but will seek to benefit themselves. In terms of character education, He is acting correctly for all the wrong reasons.

       In terms of the teacher, the time it would take for a student to soak in the deeper means of morals and critical thinking would be very time consuming because the lessons would require philosophy lectures, exploring confusion and meaningful practical application. Also, to make the students think critically, there is no longer a benefit of a fully obedient class or as lickona may see it as effective classroom management. This article will now argue that moral education has no place in the education curriculum. Teachers may have a hidden agenda that actions have consequences. Teachers also need to role model through the same actions. It does not matter if there was a moral lesson involved or not, the lessons being taught in schools are very important through subtle everyday interactions. Moral education would be redundant.

    Moral education would require the thought that every action and reaction should be caressed in a certain direction. Every action is being monitored by yourself or someone else thus the benefits are considered to be society and citizenship. The pregnant teenager maybe rebelling from her parents’ wishes. Teaching moral education is inherently beneficial to certain people. Purpel may argue that the educational system and high society used education to create an ideal society ((Purpel, 1999, 84). The pregnant teen maybe using her pregnancy for attention. This is where critical thinking would be more practical then and oversimplified description that someone was lacking morals so they got pregnant.

   Lickona may argue that moral education is critical thinking. He suggests the importance of finding time to reflect meaningfully of the actions (Lickona, 1996, para. 21). That is his interpretation of education and critical thinking. The problem is moral thinking is closed ended. Purpel argues that the discussions is muddled with historical and external influence thus benefits certain people. Boyd argues that the flawed process of moral education denies the right for internal growth. Moral education is a dichotomy of constantly seeking morally equilibrium. Either the morally inferior try and chase an end goal of being a better person or the morally superior will teach lessons to those who are beneath their perceived level.

       A Critical thinking lense may argue that growth is not a comparison of the other. Comparison would be most beneficial only to the superficial sense. The major question revolves around betterment of self and thus the students. One may ask if students better off today when compared to yesterday. A teacher who is teaching a lesson should question whether they believe in the lessons they are teaching. Maybe a teacher should ask Lickona's questions but it should be more thorough by including what a student believes in. Maybe responsibility can have different interpretations. Maybe a teacher and students can looks at problems from a moral lens and beyond. Character education is too fixated on the thought process and not enough on the practical learning skills.

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