The Push for Moral Education in Schools

by Amitai Etzioni

The next time many American parents look over their children's homework, they may well have a surprise coming. Alongside the familiar exercises in reading, writing and arithmetic, they could find questions such as:

— "Complete the following sentence: A cop stops a speeding car; he sees it's the President of the United States! He says..."

— "You are in a group of persons with whom you would like to be friends. Two members of the group begin to tease a nearby girl who has a very strange face. Others in the group join in, although a few are silent. You would..."

— "Answer the following questions after reading 'The Triumphant Entry Into Jerusalem' (Mark 11:1-19; Luke 19:28-40): Would you have been able to turn over the tables of money changers in the temple? Wasn't this violent and destructive of private property?"

Moral values taught

These are samples of the hottest new item in school curricula: moral education. It is now found in more than 1000 public schools, and many more will soon incorporate it. A recent Gallup Poll showed that four out of five Americans favor "instruction in the schools that would deal with morals and moral behavior." To this end, the American Bar Association has developed and is promoting new teaching material aimed at inculcating in schoolchildren a greater respect for the law. "Value Clarification" material prepared by Prof. Sidney B. Simon of the University of Massachusetts and his colleagues is already used by more than 600 schools. Its aim is to help pupils discover what they believe in, why they believe in it, how to argue clearly for it and apply it in their daily lives.

Some Americans who are ambivalent or opposed to the new moral education fear that it could open a back door to religious education in public schools. This group includes members of minority religions who anticipate that the religious views which would seep in are unlikely to be theirs. Educators warn that unless moral-education is taught in the context of citizen education, civics or social studies, lawsuits may be filed to stop it.

Yet few dispute the evidence that there is genuine cause for concern about the ethics of the upcoming generation of Americans. About a third of the young Americans questioned in a national poll admitted that they cheated on exams; close to a third (32 percent) that they had taken advantage of a cashier's error, and nearly one fourth (23 percent) that they had shoplifted.

In addition, there is evidence that quite a few young Americans do not subscribe to values basic to democracy and decent interpersonal relations. A study based on national samples of 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds found that nearly half (43 percent) would object to a person of a different race doing one or more of the following things: staying in the same hotel; sitting at the next table in a crowded restaurant; representing him or her in some elected office; living next door; being his or her dentist or doctor. And although the majority support individual rights and freedoms in principle, less than a third would grant freedom of speech to those espousing Communist, atheistic, or racist beliefs.

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Families and churches fail

At the same time, the traditional sources of moral education—families, churches, and neighborhoods—are weakening. Millions of families have broken up, leaving children subject to conflicting ideas about what is and is not proper. Millions of parents in intact homes have abandoned teaching moral values and imposing moral rules under the aegis of permissiveness. Churches cannot be a source of moral education for the millions who do not attend, or attend only nominally. Many neighborhoods are in great flux or promote a deviant youth subculture.

Schools are undoubtedly the chief means available to communities that seek to promote a higher level of ethics among the next generation of Americans. But the schools cannot be expected to carry out this task effectively until the child's total in-school experience—with grading, sports, discipline, not just curriculum content—is supportive of moral development.