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**Moral Literacy as School Reform:  
 Implications for the Classroom**

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Faced with parental dissatisfaction over the absence of a curricular focus on moral education, combined with a general perception of moral decline among American youth, school leaders are increasingly attracted to the notion of programs focused on the development of moral literacy within their students. For many, the societal costs resulting from a neglect of education's moral dimensions has been given recent emphasis by the brutal images that flash across our television screens. Through events such as the recent Virginia Tech shootings and the preceding Columbine attack, parents are having their worst fears realized and are now responding with calls for our nation's public schools to return to a holistic approach to education. Despite seemingly standing in stark contrast to the current educational obsession with pure academics, in truth a developing base of research is providing a link between moral education and achievement. Both research and experience are illustrating that it is necessary to educate the whole person.

Clearly there are ethical issues currently plaguing America's youth with significant portions of blame being placed at schoolhouse doors. Advocates of moral education argue that integration of a moral literacy component within existing curriculum could alleviate, if not eliminate these problems. However, the onus is placed on the schools to alleviate social ills run rampant. Many believe that students must be taught how to act in what can be considered a morally adept way both within the school and within the broader community. However, critics recognize the danger of placing moral instruction within the hands of an organization ill equipped to handle it. In the past, little attention has been paid to training teachers to address the moral concerns of classroom teaching during their pre-service training or post-degree professional development

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(Berkowitz, 1998; Jones, Ryan, & Bohlin, 1998; Reetz & Jacobs, 1999). Without the proper training of both teachers and school administrators, many worry about the entanglement of religion and politics within the public school domain. It is the position of the authors, however, that these and other concerns can be adequately addressed through a deliberate and systemic integration of a moral literacy focus within schools. What follows will offer support for that position as well as provide a discussion of the practical matters commonly involved with implementation of a moral literacy program.

### **What is Moral Literacy?**

Prior to embarking on an analysis of moral literacy and its integration into the classroom, it is necessary to establish a common vocabulary. Often the trepidation exhibited by school officials in considering programs related to moral education is based on misunderstandings emerging from the use of differing vocabularies as well as the dispositions formed through past exposure to antiquated values education initiatives. To build a bridge over these experiences and miscommunications, the terms related to moral education used throughout this paper will be both defined and discussed. Of particular importance to clarity is an understanding of what moral literacy means within the context of public education. To develop this definition it proves useful to break the term into its component parts.

In developing a meaningful understanding of literacy, it is useful to turn toward both a definition and a processual understanding of the term. Literacy itself can be described as the acquisition of capabilities or skills related to a competency with a specific body of related knowledge. However, the development of a literacy is not a naturally occurring process. As described by Herman,

Becoming literate is not an organic process, like physical growth; nor is it, like speech, the natural outcome of social life. It is a culture-dependent, intentional process. To be literate in a domain is to have the capacity to recognize and perform at some specified level of competency. One can be 'barely literate' or 'semiliterate.' (1998, p. 3)

The implication of her analysis is that concerted effort is necessary in developing a literacy and that the outcome of that effort is a certain level of skill judged within a contextually based scale of competency. To be literate, one cannot rely on a passive inculcation of ability but must instead work to develop the skill. Implied in this also is the need for instruction, be it formal or simply observational. Without such instruction, the individual is prevented from moving beyond their foundational level of skill.

The preceding description moves beyond a limited vision of literacy as simply a measure of one's ability to read and comprehend written materials. Literacy can pertain to any kind of knowledge, regardless of its nature. Within the context of this paper, literacy is applied to the realm of morals, an oft-misunderstood field intimately linked to controversial figures and divisive programs of school reform. As a result, it is necessary to establish a clear meaning of the term as it will be used. Guidance in this task is provided by the Stanford Philosophical Dictionary, defining moral as:

1. descriptively to refer to a code of conduct put forward by a society or,
  - a. some other group, such as a religion, or
  - b. accepted by an individual for her own behavior or
2. normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons. (Gert, 2005)

Primarily, moral has been viewed within the field of education as representative of religious codes of conduct, although one can see that such an interpretation is limited in scope. Moral can apply to numerous hierarchical levels of application from the individual through to society and arguably, humankind. Too often, moral is mistaken for a domain of thought such as religion, law, or even a social convention (Elder, 1999). These domains are not inherently moral in nature, and to treat them as such confounds the meaning of moral literacy and contributes to the misunderstanding of its application.

To provide further clarity regarding the construct of moral literacy, Nancy Tuana (2006) of the Rock Ethics Institute defined it as:

1. The ability to recognize moral problems and to assess the complex issues that they raise.
2. The ability to evaluate moral problems from many perspectives.
3. The ability to assess disagreements on, and proposed responses to these problems. (p. 2)

This definition illustrates the active nature of moral literacy as a process necessitating conscious use of a specialized skill set. Although the morality that underlies this process may be subconscious, acting upon it in a morally literate way is a

conscious decision that requires the individual to recognize, assess, and evaluate the problem before them within context. Moral literacy within the school context rests on a developed ability to both recognize and assess the moral aspects of a particular problem. This understanding of moral literacy lends itself to integrated practice within existing curricula as lessons replete with moral dimensions are most likely already being used throughout a school, requiring only a purposeful attention to those dimensions.

In common usage, programs of moral literacy for students are treated as constructs isolated from the regular, everyday curriculum. By setting this precedent of isolation, school districts are implicitly condoning the inferior treatment of such subject matters. They display through their actions that moral literacy takes a back seat to other curricular subjects that often act as achievement measures associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This approach results in an outpouring of disappointment and disillusionment when local students fail to exhibit increases in performance associated with moral literacy programs throughout the literature.

While establishing the clarity of the terms is an essential first step in the exploration of moral literacy development in schools, it fails to address the meaning of the concepts in action. Not accommodated are the dynamics of time and the turbulence of social and organizational contexts. Those elements will be addressed in a later section of this paper, for it is first necessary to establish the reasoning behind the importance of the moral literacy movement and to place it within the context of school reforms.

### **Why is Moral Literacy Important?**

Since the advent of NCLB and the pressures associated with meeting measures of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), school-level focus on programs of moral literacy has waned (Dillon, 2006). This tendency is despite a national trend developed over the past twenty years of increasing calls within the public and policy spheres for schools to attend to the moral needs of their students (Sanchez, 2005). Recognizing a moral decline within our nation's youth represented by disturbing rates of teen pregnancy, drug use, school violence, cheating, and dishonesty (Glazer, 1996), school reformers are also paying increasing attention to the proven potential of programs of moral education. In the face of tragic displays of school violence, parents and administrators alike are turning toward moral education's ability to "ameliorate everyday cause and outcomes of intergroup discord – such as prejudice and discrimination – as well as more extreme consequences of intergroup conflict – such as hate crimes" (Schultz, Barr, & Selman, 2001, p. 3).

As a result of the disconnect between policy, popular demand, and practice, researchers have been working to tie the outcomes of moral literacy programs with increased student achievement, framing those programs as both pragmatic and in concert with the higher goals of education. Post-NCLB, a moral literacy program's success must be judged on the effect it has on the development of a positive school environment, its contribution to student achievement, as well as the opportunity costs associated with channeling resources toward its implementation. Emerging research has begun developing a cogent argument that programs centered on morality can positively affect all these domains (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, 2005b; Flay & Allred, 2003; Heavey, Meyers, Mozdren, & Warneke, 2002; Schwartz, Beatty, & Dachnowicz, 2005; Tonkin, 2003; D. D. Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, & Lewis, 2003) while demanding little in the way of opportunity costs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005c; Bulach, 2002; Tonkin, 2003).

Policy makers have begun to institutionalize programs of moral education through inclusion into significant educational legislation. Among these is the Partnerships in Character Education Program as authorized under Title V of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. It acts to provide monies of up to one-million dollars targeted toward the development and implementation of character education programs at the local level. This federal focus is in addition to over 26 states that explicitly require the use of character education programs within their public schools. While the blanket term of character education can be used to identify a broad range of programs that do not necessarily contain aspects of moral literacy, the actions of numerous states in conjunction with the availability of federal sources of funding highlight a paradigmatic shift within educational policy. Unfortunately, the extrinsic motivators represented by federal monies fail to address the intrinsic needs necessary for program success at the local level (Allred, 1998; Anderson, Narvaez, Bock, Endicott, & Lies, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Fullan, 1992a; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996); specifically, the need for the development of internal capacity to carry out the program.

### **What does it look Like in the Classroom?**

Character education represents the most common incarnation of school reforms related to the development of moral literacy. Largely serving as a broad category of school reform, character education includes a diverse grouping of initiatives centered on attempts at affecting the behavior and decision-making processes of students. Battistich, for example, describes character education as "the deliberate use of all dimensions of school life to foster optimal character development" (2005, p. 3). The use of diffuse language in such definitions precludes the identification of specific traits or conceptual frameworks that can be used to represent the character education movement as a whole. Instead, character educa-

tion programs can encompass:

Approaches as diverse as Piaget's cognitive developmental stages, Aristotle's Socratic questioning techniques, Dewey's progressive democratic practices, and Nodding's "ethic of care" in community building. It allows for many definitions and interpretations of character, including definitions that are focused on right and wrong, and that are as interested with matters of "care" (i.e., mutual respect and cooperation), as with more traditional ethics (i.e., justice and fairness). (p. 33)

For some schools then, the character education designation is simply used to identify existing practices of incorporating unstructured ethical discussions into existing curricula, particularly in courses conducive to the arrangement, such as Social Studies, English, and Science (Schwartz, Beatty, and Dachnowicz, 2005). The use of ethical discussion, while representative of techniques used to develop moral literacy, is but a single approach among many utilized at the classroom level. Practices of developing moral literacy exist as a subset of the broader character education movement, but one worthy of concerted focus and attention due to its unique ability to fundamentally affect student behaviors while avoiding controversial trappings. From here we will move to a discussion of three of the primary forms taken by moral education at the local level: direct instruction, indirect instruction, and the development of community supports.

### **Direct instruction**

Predating the Kohlbergian understanding of moral development, direct instruction represents a traditional method of inculcating students with the shared virtues of a society. The goal served through this method is the development of habits—as opposed to a Kohlbergian development of understanding—of virtuous behavior within students. This approach is most commonly linked with William Bennett (1997) and his use of moral stories to inspire emulation of virtuous behaviors in students. Represented by his *Book of Virtues*, Bennett predicates his approach on the “importance of inspiring books and stories of virtue because these texts contain the motivations and aspirations of moral heroes who face a variety of moral conflicts” (Narvaez, 2002, p. 156). Through the reading of moral texts, he argues, children can identify and emulate heroes deemed morally appropriate. However, despite the popular success of his book, little research has been produced to support the use of character stories as a sole approach for schools (Leming, 2000; Narvaez, 2002), and many theorists agree that values cannot or should not be taught directly (Suhor & Suhor, 1992). Others identify direct instruction as an effective technique when used as a component in a multi-strategy approach to character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005b, 2005c).

### **Indirect instruction**

Influenced by the works of both Kohlberg and Piaget, methods of indirect instruction for developing moral understanding emphasize “the interpersonal interactions of peers under the guidance of caring adults” (M. M. Williams, 2000, p. 35). The focus within the paradigm of indirect instruction centers on the development of tools within the student for navigating within the world of ethics as well as illuminating the moral aspects of everyday life. The typical method in which this form of moral education can be experienced in the classroom is in teacher-guided debate on controversial issues. These exercises strive on the surface to develop a form of cognitive dissonance in the students, necessitating a re-evaluation of their initial positions in light of conflicting viewpoints. This contrasts starkly with moral clarity of the approach forwarded by Bennett, and can prove uncomfortable for teachers insufficiently trained in its techniques.

In accordance with the moral development theories of modern moral theorists (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000; Selman, 1980), indirect instruction allows students to develop their moral reasoning in social settings rather than through simple transmission, resulting in a cognitive dissonance that must be supported and developed by the classroom teacher. Shulman (2002) offers an example of this method, describing her attempts within her own mathematics classroom to “enable students to make explicit what their values are, encourage them to examine their bases and principals, and give them practice in making moral choices based on them” (p. 118). Moral understanding is not transmitted within her classroom; it is fostered through the creation of an environment fertile for students to examine the application of their own moral foundations to potential future situations. Combined with other tools of indirect instruction such as the development of moral and democratic communities, modeling of moral behaviors, the use of cooperative education, and the encouragement of moral reflection, teachers can maximize students’ potential for the development of moral literacy (Lickona, 1998).

### **Community Building**

While it is generally agreed upon that families and community have a significant influence on the moral development of their children, there is little agreement upon the more specific implications of this for public schools and their

leaders. Current research serves to highlight the important positive academic and social effects that connections between schools and the broader community can yield (Edwards & Young, 1992; Epstein, 1991; Gramezy, 1985; Henderson, 1987; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Russell & Elder, 1997; Simon, 2001; Walberg & Wallace, 1992). In response, movements emerging out of the work of Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2002) calls for a community building approach to moral literacy, shifting focus from instruction to the creation of caring environments supportive of moral development. This call is also reflected through policy, as the U.S. Department of Education's Partnerships in Character Education program requires collaborative inclusion of parents into program design and implementation as a prerequisite for the allocation of funding.

Connecting the school's moral education mission with the views of the community at large also serves to ease anxieties over dissonance between what is being practiced at the school and what is modeled throughout the community. Just as inculcation has been largely dismissed as an effective form of moral education, moral relativism is equally rejected throughout the literature. Developing a moral education program through collaboration with community allows for the program to be grounded in the socially constructed morality that was proposed in modern frameworks for moral development (McDaniel, 1998; Rest et al., 2000; Selman, 1980). It follows then that the development of healthy moral education programs means empowering all stakeholder groups, including such traditionally disempowered groups as students, support staff, and parents. Role modeling from parents is essential in well-functioning moral education, as the behaviors and practices of adults in the student's life should align with the moral mission of the school. To promote respect in students, adults must treat young people respectfully and to foster responsibility, they must give students genuine voice and responsibility (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a, p. 68)

### **The Teacher's Role**

The primary role of the classroom teacher within a program of moral literacy rests in the development of an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable sharing self-reflections and other sensitive information with their teachers and peers alike. This environment, once established, serves as the foundation for future moral development within the school context (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005c; Lickona, 1998; Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 1997). As Paolitto notes,

The developmental perspective requires that teachers become competent not simply in knowledge and skills in their content area, but also in their ability to create conditions for social interactions that are conducive to structural change. That is, the teacher needs to promote interaction which will stimulate children's thinking to the next higher level of moral reasoning. (1977, p. 73)

A teacher must do more than passively provide opportunities for moral dissonance to foster development in students. For teachers involved in this work—and some could argue that all teachers are involved in this work—moral literacy should be a pervasive commitment, a paradigm for classroom and school activities. To accomplish this, teachers must possess a foundational understanding of moral development theories and be knowledgeable of techniques for developing environments which facilitate moral literacy.

Attention to individual, isolated practice is insufficient, as “the degree of moral development that may occur within a school will be affected by the moral atmosphere of the school as a whole” (Doris, 1978, p. 36). As identified through research into effective programs of moral literacy, comprehensive, school-wide change is necessary to produce the significant outcomes associated with moral education. From an administrative perspective however, restricting the application of a moral literacy program to a few subjects possesses the advantage of limiting the exposure of the school to criticisms from parents leery of school encroachment into the ethical domain. Despite this, selective application throughout a site fails to produce the supportive culture necessary to realize program success.

### **What are the Expected Outcomes?**

Despite the broad base of research concerning the effectiveness of programs related to moral education, few show agreement on the particular outcomes expected. Largely determined by the context in which a specific program was initiated, expected outcomes can lie within any of the social, cognitive, or behavioral domains. A common trait, most likely derived from the public impetus for moral education, is a focus on the direct influence of student behaviors. Emerging as a result of a perceived decline in moral behavior among American youth along with exposure to high profile school tragedies such as the Columbine shootings (Brooke, 2000) and the more recent Amish school shooting (Kocieniewski & Gately, 2006), parents, teachers, and administrators are calling for concerted efforts to curb violent and destructive behaviors.

Faced with parent concerns over state entanglement with what are perceived as deeply personal constructs of

morality, some within the field, including the authors, advocate a reconceptualization of moral education to focus instead on the development of student abilities to identify and analyze ethical issues in everyday life, termed here as moral literacy. Rather than the inculcation of specific moral behaviors, a focus on moral literacy works indirectly to alleviate social ills through the formation of ethically competent students. Combined with the elements of moral education focused on community building and the subsequent inclusion of parents and community members into the process, this approach serves to relieve the potential tensions related to program implementation. Students are not presented with a moral framework, which remains the domain of the family and society, but with a set of tools necessary for acting in an ethical way. Through this process, students develop “self-knowledge and a personal point of view, which reflects clarity about their values and convictions. Furthermore, they can be true to their values because by knowing their values they are able to resist social or situational pressures to compromise their values” (Branson, 2007, p. 228). Rather than undermining familial morality, a focus on the development of moral literacy reinforces and develops it within the individual. The intent within this paradigm is not to directly influence the core values of an individual, but to develop the tools of ethical analysis necessary for an individual to progress in their own moral development, a goal in line with the field’s prevailing theories.

Although the limited effectiveness related to the use of character stories in direct instructional environments has been documented (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006), its use through indirect instruction is showing some promise. A positive correlation has been shown to exist between critical thinking skills developed through the study of literature and student moral reasoning (Tighe, 1998), although its effect does not seem to spread to affective and behavioral outcomes (Leming, 2000). Literature used in this way is not intended to instruct on acceptable behavior, but to serve as a focus for discussion on the varied perspectives and values represented within the works. A teacher must be cautious however, as the limitation of reading selections to one particular point of view could border on inculcation and direct instruction. Despite this risk, the mindful use of literature itself can provide a critical tool for the incorporation of moral education into classrooms in all grades.

### **Requirements for Effective Implementation**

A review of character education research studies highlight attributes common to multiple effective programs, offering some general guidelines important for consideration when implementing a site-based intervention incorporating aspects of moral literacy (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005c; Schwartz et al., 2005; Sullivan, 1977; S. E. Williams, 1993; Wrobel, 1997). First among these is the need for the program goals to be both explicit and ambitious, preferably developing out of a collaborative effort between teachers, administrators, and community members (Chandler, 1997; Fullan, 1992a, 1992b; Owens, 1992; Starratt, 1994). Doing so establishes immediate buy-in from those charged with implementing the initiative as well as ensuring that the scope, intention, and potential of the program is understood by all those involved.

The pursuit of moral literacy involves much more than simply acknowledging its importance. A local capacity for implementation is necessary and must be developed through concerted administrative effort. Among the needs related to capacity is the development of instructional skills within the teaching force necessary for understanding moral literacy and its development in students (Rogan, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2005; Sullivan, 1977; Youngs & King, 2002). Along these lines, professional development is often recognized as both an essential and oft-overlooked component of moral education reform. While some assume an inherent expertise in teachers related to moral education, in reality it involves a set of skills distinct from common pedagogy. As noted by Berkowitz and Bier (2005b),

Research has shown over and over that incomplete or inaccurate implementation leads to ineffective programs. If those same implementers are also going to be writing lesson plans or in other ways designing the implementation, then it is doubly important that they receive adequate professional development. Unfortunately, professional development is expensive and the substantial time required is at a premium. Schools and districts need to make professional development a priority or it is unlikely to happen, and neither is effective character education and ongoing learning communities. (p. 20)

A similar argument could also be made for those involved in the administration of moral literacy programs. Methods of developing school communities capable of sustaining these efforts as well as the skills necessary for addressing the particular issues involved in this sometimes-controversial endeavor are unique, requiring specialized training and attention. Often this training can also be the impetus for another necessity for sustained and effective reform, the support of administration for implementation. The result of externally imposed directives from either state or federal educational authorities, a lack of administrator support for developing moral literacy is often fatal to the program (Schwartz et al., 2005). In comparison, a common attribute of successful programs is a foundation in collaboration that allows for a program tailored to the needs of the local site and its particular community. Without this foundation, moral literacy is devel-

oped within an artificial vacuum of abstraction and must struggle from the beginning to elicit community support.

Success depends on more than the internal capacity of the school however, as those programs that elicit the most significant positive outcomes possess a vision beyond the confines of the school walls. Involving the broader community in which the school resides develops a synergy capable of extending and reinforcing the influence of in-school interventions. Adults throughout the community can then serve as role models of morally literate beings. Moreover, since “any incongruence will seriously undermine the integrity and effectiveness of the approach” (Sanchez, 2005, p. 110), community involvement in conjunction with explicit goals is necessary to develop a shared understanding of objectives. Seeking to develop this community capacity for moral literacy requires the development of collaborative relationships between teachers, school leaders, business leaders, community members, and parents. Such an arrangement works to coordinate school environments with the broader community environment so that the one does not work against the other. The acknowledgement of the necessity for this partnership also illuminates the need for all adults in contact with students to act as role models in accord with the proposed ideals of the particular programs. Starratt (1994) provides the compelling vision of a school based on such a collaboration and shared vision of moral reform.

Piecemeal attempts to nurture ethical development in youngsters are praiseworthy, but they will not be nearly as effective as a thorough and consistent school-wide effort. When youngsters encounter various teachers throughout the school day who model ethical values, when ethical concerns are discussed in various subjects across the curriculum, when multiple opportunities are present to practice the ethic of caring, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of critique, when guidance counselors, coaches and moderators of student activities all consistently speak about ethical concerns, when the school corridors are hung with posters which reflect ethical values of self-respect, loyalty and honesty, and when school and the home express consistent concern over ethical issues, the message is pretty hard to ignore. (p. 60)

It is just such a vision of comprehensive school reform firmly rooted in the development of a morally literate student body that can serve to overcome the significant obstacles that exist between theory and success. Despite the existence of a significant literature base pointing toward the potential for programs focused on moral development to affect student behaviors, attitudes, and academic achievement, actual practice often fails to address the commitment and training necessary to see success. However, the strengths of moral literacy are greater than the forces allied against it. Only through a renewed focus on addressing public education in a holistic manner can we leverage the power present within the union of public need and private good.

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