Critical Issues in Educational Policy
AN ADMINISTRATOR’S OVERVIEW

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The Morality of School Experience
AMITAI ETZIONI

Complete the following sentences:
A cop stops a speeding car, he sees it's the President of the United States! He says . . .
A woman across the street is being choked by a man; several other people obviously see it but choose to ignore it. You would . . .

Answer the following question:
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? Is this anything like the cases of students who force deans out of their offices?

Under what circumstances would you try to pass a toll machine without properly paying the fee?

- Only if I were certain that I would not be caught
- If I felt I had a good chance of not getting caught
- Never, under any circumstances
- Only if I needed the money desperately, like for family food supplies
THE MORALITY OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Using such educational materials, often both somewhat provocative and somewhat inane (How much food could money from a toll possibly buy? How likely is it that a patrolman would not notice it's the President until after he stops his limousine?) teachers are trying to provide the hottest new item in post-Watergate curricula: moral education. In collaboration with the American Bar Association, more than six hundred schools have introduced new material over the last three years, aimed at increasing knowledge of and respect for the law. Harvard professor Lawrence Kohlberg, a leading authority on moral education, has left the security of pure research to apply his theories to design and run a "just school" in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Value-clarification kits, prepared by Prof. Sidney B. Simon of the University of Massachusetts and his colleagues, are to date the most popular of the new curricula: they are used in over one thousand schools. Even the federal government is getting into the act, as we shall see.

Still, the demand for moral education vastly exceeds the supply of teaching tools and concepts. During a recent conference of specialists and practitioners of moral education at the Sugar Loaf Conference Center in Philadelphia, Emanuel Gary, representing the Chief State School Officers of Arizona, urged the experts to stop quibbling over which approach is best and provide the schools with the necessary material, "because our communities won't wait." A national conference of educators, community leaders, and politicians was held in 1976 to promote moral education, with the support of the United States Office of Education [USOE]. The Council of Chief State School Officers recently reaffirmed in a formal statement that "a primary function of public schools in this nation is to prepare students for responsible citizenship." Msgr. Francis X. Barrett of the National Catholic Educational Association brought the house down at the Sugar Loaf Conference when he said that one of the participants asked him if there was moral education in Catholic schools, the joke being that it was rather like asking if there are politics in Washington or hamburgers at McDonalds. A 1976 Gallup Poll of a random sample of adult Americans reports that four out of every five [79 percent] favor "instruction in the schools that would deal with morals and moral behavior."

Among the few who are ambivalent or hostile about the new thrust are civil libertarians, who fear that moral education could open a back door to religious education in public schools. This fear is shared by minority religions who anticipate that the religious views which would seep in are quite unlikely to be theirs. Thus, Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, speaking for the Synagogue Council of America, read a statement at the Sugar Loaf Conference that resoundingly endorsed moral education in public schools, but expressed alarm that it might be used to teach religion. And [Gary], the school official from Arizona, warned that unless moral education is taught
in the context of citizen education, civics, or social studies, law suits may well be filed to stop it.

Behind the surprisingly broad consensus that we need to provide more moral education for the next generation of Americans, there is considerable disagreement as to what the nature of the problem is, what is to be taught, and how.

WHAT IS WRONG?

What parents, educators, and community leaders perceive as the problem moral education should address depends largely on their upbringing, and on whether their outlook on personal and political issues is liberal, conservative, or some mixture of both. Thus, many of those who call themselves conservatives are alarmed about the decline in religion while crime, sexual permissiveness, and rebellion against authority are on the increase. Clare Boothe Luce, former congresswoman and ambassador, writes that if present trends “persist into 1996, America by then will be the most drunken, drug-soaked, sex-ridden and criminal society on earth.” In contrast, many liberals, especially on the left, tend to identify as the nation’s major moral defects what they see as a disregard for basic human rights and civil liberties, persistence of poverty, social injustice, and “exploitation by institutions.”

Different cue words are used by various groups to signal their particular views regarding the underlying sources and appropriate remedies for the nation's ethical malaise. Thus, the American Bar Association refers to the need for law-related studies in schools, implying that the ethical instruction students require is in more respect for and obedience to the law.

On the other hand, the followers of Professor Kohlberg favor the term moral reasoning (rather than compliance) which aptly conveys their view that at its highest level, morality is creative, entailing the capacity to formulate and follow principles higher than the code of one's community. Thus in a story used by Kohlberg and his associates to teach moral reasoning, Helga must decide whether or not to hide her friend Rachel from the Gestapo—clearly a violation of the law of that land, but an ethical act according to the “higher law” of conscience.

USOE officials, trying to sidestep the political booby traps risked in following one path or another, prefer such terms as civic education, civic ethics, or citizen/moral education—terms which, apart from stressing secular rather than religious concepts of ethics, presumably encompass some of everything.

Such eclecticism may well be wise in more than just a political sense because the available evidence suggests that whichever viewpoints one
adopts, there is cause for concern about the ethics of the upcoming generation of Americans. While cries of a crisis may well be exaggerated, signs of moral deficiencies are abundant.

For instance, as everyone who reads a newspaper is well aware, the military academies have had major cheating scandals recently. Cheating per se is no doubt as old as school itself but the proportions of the cheating in these cases has to give pause. The Naval Academy expelled seven midshipmen, censured thirteen, and demoted an instructor—the largest group of cheaters caught in recent memory. At West Point, 173 third-year cadets (out of a class of 870) have so far been implicated in the electrical-engineering-exam cheating scandal, and estimates about the number who may yet be implicated run as high as 300 and more. It is significant that service academy students as a group are much above average in terms of character, are recruited from among youth whose anchoring in traditional values is strongest, and are expected to graduate to positions of national responsibility.

The behavior of other leaders-in-the-making seems to leave no more room for comfort. At the University of Florida at Gainesville, two hundred business-school students were found to be involved in the theft and sale of exams. The Educational Testing Service of Princeton—which administers the Scholastic Aptitude Test (used by colleges in selecting which students to admit), the Graduate Record Examinations, and the Law Boards (which are used to choose among applicants to graduate or professional schools)—has had to resort increasingly in recent years to fingerprinting to prevent students who did poorly the first time around from hiring someone to take the test for them.

Once admitted, students at practically every major university in the United States have access to at least one commercial "paper mill," which for $2.00 a page for undergraduate term papers, or $10,000 for an "original" Ph.D. thesis, service a growing clientele. The supply is reportedly limited only because these firms are unable to retain enough "talented" employees.

How widespread are other forms of unethical behavior among the young? The difficulty in answering this question is that, for the most part, we have to rely on what the young people themselves tell us about their behavior. Thus 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.

Moreover, many of those young Americans who claim to hold such traditional values as honesty in high regard turn out, on closer inspection, to be none too firm in their commitment. Thus, while by far the majority (87 percent) of teenagers agree that one should "always tell the truth,"
more than half see little wrong in "telling a lie to spare someone's feelings." Three out of four say they would be willing to depart from "always telling the truth" to "help a close friend in a tight spot."

More is at stake than not holding the old values to be sacrosanct: it is a question of how free one feels to adapt ethical principles to fit in with considerations of personal preference of self-interest. The freer one feels to act on this, the less power moral codes and principles command. The basis of such codes and principles is that they are applied "because they are right" and not tailored to suit the circumstances. Once the notion is accepted that, given a good reason, an ethical precept can be vacated, the only limit to unethical behavior is the limit of one's capacity to invent excuses.

Those who see in a concern for telling the truth a kind of naive boy scout morality—and believe stretching the truth, a certain amount of pilfering, and getting around the rules (e.g., cheating on exams) are either trivial or necessary for getting ahead or just getting along "in our kind of society"—may nonetheless find their own causes for concern when they learn that large numbers of American youth do not subscribe to values basic to democracy and decent interpersonal relations. Thus a study based on national samples of thirteen year olds and seventeen year olds found that nearly half (43 percent) would object to a person of a different race doing one or more of the following five things: staying in the same hotel; sitting at the next table in a crowded restaurant; representing him 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 one-third would grant freedom of speech to those espousing communist, atheistic, or racist beliefs.

Does all this mean that the ethics of American youth are gradually disintegrating? In most areas, it is just not possible to answer this question. It is clear, however, and not irrelevant, that the majority of Americans sense a decline. In a 1976 poll, two-thirds (66 percent) said "no" when asked whether they thought people live as moral and honest a life in the United States today as they used to, compared with 52 percent who perceived such a decline in 1965, and 46 percent in 1952. The feeling that others behave less well than they used to is one reason people use to justify their own deviations.

Finally, in some areas of behavior there are "hard" data documenting increases in activities about which there is broad consensus as to their unethical character. According to a United States Senate subcommittee study encompassing 757 school districts, from 1970 to 1973 assaults on teachers increased by 77 percent, robberies in schools by 37 percent, and rapes by 40 percent. Since then, further increases have been reported. Data on shoplifting by young persons show a similar sharp upturn. In short,
there may well be no place for alarm, but the measure of unethical attitudes and behavior surely deserves attention.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

It is impossible here to do descriptive justice to the plethora of educational philosophies, theories, and techniques competing with one another to shape how the schools are to take on moral education. A recent overview prepared by Research for Better Schools notes, for example, "cognitive decision, developmental, prosocial, valuing and values clarification, and a long list of other approaches. Teaching techniques range from the more familiar style utilizing classroom materials designed to enrich the conventional curriculum, to more unusual, even far out, exercises. Looking in on how teachers apply them (with apologies to those whose favorite technique is left out) affords us an insight into the promise and the limitations of moral education.

Giving the Blue-eyed the Blues

Progressive educators are keenly aware of the frequent reproach that preaching ethics in the classroom is unlikely to have much effect, if any. Similarly they are aware that to assign readings in "morals" textbooks, the way children are taught English lit or geography, is not likely to be nearly as productive for character as for cognitive development. So the search is on, among those who believe that schools should be in the ethical education business, to find more psychologically powerful ways to get moral values across.

Jane Elliott, a third-grade teacher at Community Elementary School in Riceville, Iowa, came up with a method sufficiently imaginative and arresting to become the subject of an ABC news documentary, "The Eye of the Storm," and a book, A Class Divided, by William Peters [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971]. What Jane Elliott did in 1970 is of particular interest in the context of the current moral-education drive because despite the successful results she by all accounts achieved, so few schools have seemingly followed her lead.

Jane Elliott wanted to teach her students the injustice of discrimination, but she sensed that just talking about the arbitrariness and unfairness of race prejudice would be too academic to have much impact. Her inspiration was to appeal directly to the kids' capacities for emotional experience and empathetic insight by declaring a day of discrimination against
the blue-eyed. She began by “explaining” the innate superiority of the “cleaner, more civilized, smarter” brown-eyed. When the kids were, at first, disbelieving, she snapped sarcastically at a blue-eyed child, “Is that the way we’ve been taught to sit in class?,” and then moved all the blue-eyed to the back of the room. To the tune of self-satisfied snickers from the brown-eyed, she then informed the blue-eyed children that they would not be permitted to play on the big playground at recess and could only play at all if invited to by a brown-eyed child. Throughout the day she was conspicuously more tolerant of mistakes by brown-eyed children.

The brown-eyed quickly began to enjoy lording it over the blue-eyed, who showed growing signs of insecurity and loss of confidence. One blue-eyed girl, used to being popular, was desolate, did poorly in class and walked around in a fog, after being given the “treatment” by her erstwhile friends—especially after being deliberately hit across the back by her brown-eyed best friend.

After reversing the roles, Elliott had every child write about how it felt to be discriminated against. Though to many adults the procedure may sound more than a bit heavy-handed, as far as the kids were concerned the experience took. That it had a profound impact is apparent in such comments as, “I felt dirty, left out, thought of quitting school” and the like. The children were not shy about saying how “rotten” it felt to be labeled inferior and how relieved they were to be equal again.

Moral Discussion

A tamer and less gripping method of moral education is via discussion of moral dilemmas. Thus, the students in a Pittsburgh junior high school started their civics class one Monday morning not with a rehash of branches of government, the meaning of checks and balances, or with that pragmatic addition of recent years, how to fill out Form 1040A; instead they were presented with a brief moral dilemma, as follows:

Sharon and Jill were best friends. One day they went shopping together. Jill tried on a sweater and then, to Sharon’s surprise, walked out of the store with the sweater under her coat. A moment later, the store’s security officer stopped Sharon and demanded that she tell him the name of the girl who had walked out. He told the storeowner that he had seen the two girls together, and that he was sure that the one who left had been shoplifting. The storeowner told Sharon that she could really get in trouble if she didn’t give her friend’s name.1

1. This dilemma situation, based on a story created by Dr. Frank Alessi [a member of the staff of the Carnegie-Mellon/ Harvard Values Education Project] is cited by Dr. Barry K. Beyer, Inquiry and the Social Studies Classroom: A Strategy of Teaching (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1971).
Without further ado, the teacher confronted the class: should Sharon tell?

George: Jill could say, "I don't even know her. I just walked in the store off the street, and I don't even know where she lives. I just met her."

Teacher: So what she ought to do is lie for a friend. Right?

George: Yah.

Teacher: What is going to happen to all of us if everyone lies whenever they feel like it, whenever it suits their convenience? What kind of life are you going to have? Peter.

Peter: If everyone goes around shoplifting, if someone goes and steals a whole bunch of things from somebody's store, then you go back to your store and see everything from your store missing, do you know what kind of life that would be? Everybody would just be walking around stealing everybody else's stuff.

Teacher: Mary Lu, do you want to comment about what he said?

Mary Lu: Yah, but everybody doesn't steal and everybody wouldn't, and the thing is that the storeowner probably has a large enough margin of profit anyway to cover some few ripoffs he might have.

George: But the store can't exist if everybody is stealing, there are so many people, and it is getting worse and worse every day. It said in the story, they can't afford to stay.

Mary Lu: I'm not sure I believe the storeowner.

Roland: I am saying so what? It is like stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. It just doesn't work, you know.

Teacher: Why doesn't it work, Roland?

Roland: Because it is exactly what Dan said. Mary Lu can say everybody does not do it, but the only thing that holds it together is the government, and you don't have government if everybody does not follow the rules. Well, we'll have government, but we won't follow the rules.

What the educators who favor this approach stress as important about such dialogues is first of all that a discussion rather than a lecture takes place; that the teacher refrains from pronouncing her values; and tolerates a free expression of students' viewpoints.

Second, they believe—and are backed up on this belief by some data—that such give-and-take improves students' awareness of moral issues, improves their ability to reason out moral issues, and leads to higher levels of moral reasoning.

The scholar most often cited by students of moral reasoning is Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg. He suggests, following Piaget, that children move from an amoral stage toward ever greater concern with the needs and feelings of others, a sense of justice, reciprocity, and equality. Children at first believe in doing what is right, only because (and as long as) violations entail punishment, or conformity generates pleasure. As their capacity for
morality develops (naturally, with age) and is developed (by education) they learn to behave because in this way they will gain the approval of others (e.g., friends) and authority figures (parents, teachers). Finally, at the highest levels, they come to understand the virtue of being law abiding and ethical in their own right.

Kohlberg argues, and to some extent has demonstrated, that it is useless to try to get children at the most primitive stage of moral development to understand principles or modes of reasoning at the highest level. At the same time, it is possible, through proper classroom dialectics, to help children move up one stage at a time, in their levels of moral reasoning.

Kohlberg’s critics maintain that the link between reasoning morally and acting morally is weak; that the focus on developing the cognitive side of morality neglects the affective side, the moral commitment. This, it is said, is better achieved by more emotive techniques, such as setting examples to emulate, fostering identification of the child with educators, and encouraging the right values in the child’s peer group.

One vainly looks for data to provide a definitive answer as to which approach is better, as this is a field in which rhetoric is abundant and facts extremely sparse. Kohlberg, though, has more data to support his view—which is not to say that he has much. In the end, it may well turn out that both emotional and cognitive development and education are needed.

Just as in past years many who referred to adult black men as “boys” did not fully comprehend the offense they were giving or what was wrong in behaving so condescendingly, so many youngsters (and adults) simply do not perceive the moral issue at stake in numerous situations. For example, nearly twenty years ago, following the television quiz-show scandals, Kurt and Gladys Lang asked a class of New York University and Queens College students to rank various behaviors according to their relative unethicality, and a year ago I repeated their experiment with similar results. One of the main findings of both studies was that students tend to have a difficult time perceiving behavior as unethical if they cannot identify specific individual victims. The Langs found, for example, that the behavior of a land speculator who made millions on a tipoff from city hall was considered less unethical than that of a student who cheated on an exam—or than the behavior of Charles van Doren, the “cheating professor” of the quiz-show scandals. The reason turned out to be that the students could identify victims in the latter two cases but not in the former: a student who cheats gains an unfair competitive advantage over other students; Van Doren had “let down” television viewers who believed in him; while the students could not see that the land speculator was harming anyone. They had a hard time conceiving of the community as a whole,
or the honesty of processes of business or government, as being the victims of unethical conduct.

Similarly, given a test first developed in 1961 by F. Raymond Baumhart in which the students were asked to define what ethics meant to them, the largest group could be no more precise than “what my feelings tell me is right.” Their inability to articulate more firmly grounded ethical principles was especially striking as a fair number did tell the interviewer that it bothered them somewhat that they could not come up with a definition that was more objective, less a matter of any individual’s personal opinion. As such, there does seem to be a need for “consciousness raising” in this area.

Many of those who favor the neutrality of the moral reasoning approach are well aware that it can have unexpected and unintended results. Dr. James Gurlak of the State University of New York reported on a case where students were given a course on the police. At the end of the course, it developed that the more the students had learned about actual police procedure, the less admiration and respect they felt for the police.

In discussion groups conducted for 150 children aged eight to nine, at Brentwood College, the children were told: “There are twelve persons in a lifeboat after a shipwreck. Four must go overboard if any are to survive.” The twelve were depicted as including a teacher, a scientist, a priest, an artisan, a child of eight, a dog, etc. Invariably the teacher went overboard; never the child; often not the dog. It is questionable not only whether one wishes group discussions to enforce such views, but whether one wishes to encourage children to accept the implied ethical notion that you do throw people overboard rather than go down with them and not kill. What is a child to learn from these extreme situations, to apply to everyday life? That self-interest sanctions killing?

Pencil and Paper

By far the most prevalent method is that which seeks to teach ethics like any other subject, in the classroom, with paper-and-pencil assignments. The main champion of this approach, Prof. Sidney B. Simon of the University of Massachusetts, has just about lost count of the hundreds of schools that have purchased the “value clarification” kits he and his associates have designed. One such school is the William W. Niles Junior High School, a school with predominantly minority students, located in the Bronx. According to Claudia Macari, assistant principal for guidance, and Mildred W. Abramowitz, principal, who are responsible for introducing value clarification at Niles Junior High, the teaching technique employed is as follows:
Exercise one: “Write down twenty things you love to do.” Pause.
“Now that you have all made your lists, state the five things you love to do best of all. . . . Check the things you love to do alone. . . . X the things you love to do with other people. . . . things that cost less than $3.00 to do.”

Macari and Abramowitz explain that the purpose of having the students choose the five out of twenty things they like best is to make them aware of what it is they value. The whole idea of values clarification is not to instill or introduce any particular values, new or old, but to help students discover those they already have. Having to decide which fifteen items to leave out, which five to include, leads the youngsters to an understanding of the concept of values; i.e., of the choices inevitably involved. Moreover, the theory stresses that “exercising” one’s values, via such paper-and-pencil exercises, will help students hold on more firmly to their values. As with other facilities, so with the capacity to form and sustain values: if you don’t use it, you lose it.

The other questions in this exercise aim at helping a person to gain insight into what he or she values and why (e.g., things you do with others or by yourself); to realize that not all that you value costs a lot; and to understand “the process of valuing.”

The class then moves on to the next exercise: “You are on a congressional committee in Washington, D.C. $10 million has been given for three worthy causes. Which would you do first, second, third?: (a) Clean up rivers, garbage, sewage, pollution; (b) Train those who do not have jobs; (c) Divide the money among 10,000 needy families.”

Value clarification exercises differ from most other workbook assignments in one way: there are no right and wrong answers. Any and all answers are considered “right” as long as one can give a reason for them. Asked whether youngsters might not therefore end up reaffirming “wrong” values, such as intolerance or thievery, the designers of the approach reply: “Our position is that we respect his right to decide upon that value.”

Critics point to this moral neutrality as a main weakness of the approach. Granted that preaching a code and testing students to see if they subscribe to it may well be inappropriate, ineffectual, or both—does it follow that teachers must imply that all values are equally valid? Others claim that it is precisely this principled amorality of the value-clarification package that is the chief reason for its popularity in the public schools, which are thereby protected from having to choose whose values to teach. At the same time, whatever directions for teacher neutrality the kit contains, each teacher is in fact free to lead the discussion of each exercise as he or she sees fit—and to decide just how neutral to be if confronted with a classroom full of thirteen year old Machiavellians.

Actually, it seems to me, few teachers can maintain neutrality, hide
their feelings or views, when such issues as abortion, women's rights, and injustice to minorities are discussed in the classroom. Body language, tone of voice, allotment of more time to speak to kids who have the desired answer, if not outright statements of advocacy, are sure to cue the class as to what side of the issue the teacher is on. Whatever limited teacher training comes with the moral education kits cannot hope to neutralize the teachers' ethical feelings or put them completely out of view.

Nor may it be as important as the advocates of the kits believe it to be. The pupils are exposed to a variety of views of different teachers, coaches, parents, peers; they can well evolve their moral positions out of the competing variety of committed positions they face, rather than in an artificial moral vacuum.

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Several educators at the Sugar Loaf Conference, such as Prof. Donna Kerr from Seattle, Prof. Lisa Kuhmerker from Hunter College, grand old statesman of education Dr. Ralph Tyler, and Logan H. Sallada of the USOE, emphasized the importance of recognizing that schools affect children not only—and indeed probably not even primarily—via the curriculum taught in class, but by the way the schools themselves are structured.

It has long been understood that children learn from their parents by emulation—as is acknowledged in the well-known saying of the parent who himself sets a bad example: "Do as I say, not as I do!" The same notion is equally applicable to the ethics taught in school; that is, the way teachers, administrators, coaches and other school officials interact with the children teaches ethical values by example—or conveys some contrary message such as petty tyranny, hypocrisy, or a "see no evil" mentality. These comprise the school's "hidden curriculum." Elsa Wasserman, a counselor to the Cambridge, Massachusetts public schools, explains: "The governance structure of many schools teaches students they have no significant control over their lives in school, that they must conform to arbitrary rules or be punished, and that they should go along with what the majority thinks and does even when they disagree."

Talking to students, one finds that the core of the hidden curriculum revolves around such subjects as grades, athletics, and exploitation of some students by others (e.g., extortion). The attitudes and actions students observe on the part of school officials regarding these topics are often not ones which convey the importance of standing up for ethical principles in the face of pressures to give in to self-interest or pragmatic expediency.

For example: in two eastern Pennsylvania schools, administrators became aware that some minority pupils had formed gangs which collected
a quarter a day in "protection money" from younger, mainly white chil-
dren. For a long time, however, officials in both schools looked the other
way. Why? Well, they said, they were afraid that an active effort to find out
which children were in the extortion rings and punish them would open
them up to charges of "police tactics." Finally some gang members were
captured in both schools. In one school, the principal's response was to send
the boys to the guidance counselor, who in turn handled the matter by
asking them if perhaps their families were poor and badly needed the
money. On establishing that they were "needy," he limited his response to
a warning. The other principal's main concern was that it was a no-win
situation. As he put it, "If we kick them out of school the black commu-
nity will be up in arms and we already have our hands full with everything
from drugs to alcoholism, to vandalism, etc. . . ." After being caught, the
extortionist pupils were first suspended; then when minority parents pro-
tested, reinstated; then when white parents were outraged, sent to an
experimental school; then when the minority parents charged "exile"—back
to the original school. The school's principal felt no need to apologize for
setting policy according to which ethnic group protested most at the time.
The main issue as he saw it was not what to do about extortion, or how his
failure to do anything credible about it would affect the kids, but how to
negotiate a political tightrope without falling into the vengeful hands of
either set of outraged parents.

As for grades: they seem to have lost legitimacy for a large number of
students. But in marked contrast to the idealism of a few years back that
sought to replace grades with more meaningful evaluations, many of to-
day's students believe that nothing less than their life's fate depends on
getting into the "right" college—which in turn depends on having high
grades. But since grades themselves are seen as having little real meaning,
what one does to get the needed grades is often viewed as similarly unim-
portant. For quite a few students, the notion that cheating on exams or
term papers is a serious ethical issue seems about as quaint as the medieval
scholastic debate over how many angels can stand on the head of a pin is to
modern theologians.

Among the students I have spoken with, attitudes seem to be less cyn-
ical toward sports than toward grades. But how seriously ethical issues are
taken appears to vary with the sport; each sport has its own informal rules
of fair play that range from just somewhat to a great deal looser than the
official code. Two who play tennis said that they did believe the assistant
coach wanted them to play it fair, "gentleman style," although they were
somewhat unclear how strongly he felt that way. Referring to the National
Collegiate Athletic Association rules concerning payments to athletes, a
Columbia University tennis player explained, "... it's sort of like the mar-
ijuana laws: everyone knows it's illegal, but who cares?" Basketball play-
ers feel that they are clearly trained to keep a keen eye on the referee and push another player out of the way only when the referee is not looking, although "really digging your elbow into the other guy" is considered going too far. Football seems to be the focus of the most intense pressures to win—and hence the greatest temptations to win at any price. Football players expressed the feeling that the coaches want them to win—any way they know how, short of pulling a face mask.

Traditionally, one of the major justifications for lavishing large sums of money on sports programs—especially competitive team sports programs—in the schools has been that athletics are character-building. And indeed they very likely are, the question that needs greater attention, however, is what kind of character are they building?

The "hidden curriculum" emphasis on high grades and winning in sports suggests that grades and sports are still important tools for instilling the American success ethic and likewise, it would seem that stimulating the drive for success is still a major mission of the American school. The success "ethic" is scarcely very ethical, however, if it builds into its creed in school and afterward an attitude toward the meaning of competition and reward such as that conveyed by the late football coach Vince Lombardi's oft-quoted motto: "Winning is not the most important thing, it's the only thing." Competition may well build character and be compatible with an industrious society. But unbounded competition is incompatible with any ethical code or social order; it puts self above all.

Of all the approaches to moral education, the one which focuses on reform of the hidden curriculum is likely to be both the most relevant and the most difficult to accomplish, because teachers and students are less aware of its moral implications than they are of the formal curriculum, and because its roots lie in what the community values most. It is hence far from accidental that when Kohlberg tried to apply his ideas about how best to foster higher levels of moral reasoning in the schools, he ended up having to set up an experimental, "alternate," school; the regular school, Cambridge High and Latin School, proved to be too resistant to the structural changes he considered essential. Thus, seventy-two students were selected from all four high-school classes and together with a volunteer staff comprised a school-within-a-school, run on participatory principles. Each pupil and each staff member has one vote and "no major decision or commitments are made without consulting the entire community."

While this solution is entirely suitable to Kohlberg's experimental purposes, as a prototype its principles can be transferred to the American public school system at best only in part. It is not just that most of America is probably far from ready for such a radically egalitarian approach to the public school's authority structures. Most schools require internal reforms, such as restoring just allotment of grades which are perceived as
relevant by pupils; sports played to learn respect for rules—not just victory; and so on, bringing the hidden curriculum as close as possible in line with that taught in ethics classes.

The objection may well be raised that a school structured to produce more ethical youth would of necessity have to fail in its major mission of adequately preparing its students for later life. Such a view is especially likely to be espoused by those who believe that the American success ethic, though indeed subtler now than in its nineteenth-century form, still owes a lot to the unapologetic amorality displayed by the notorious “Boss Tweed,” who, when asked why he trafficked in political graft, winked and replied, “I seen me opportunities and I took ‘em.”

One could counter this criticism, somewhat stiffly and stubbornly perhaps, by steadfastly maintaining that the schools have a duty to educate their students morally—over and above whatever the prevalent societal standards are. At the very least, then, the students will have some principles to compromise later on; and though their standards may fall, they may nonetheless not stoop so low as they would have if they started out with no such scruples. True, most schools cannot proceed very far in promoting values not shared by the community at large. Hence, ultimately, whether via the hidden curriculum or the conventional one, before the schools can effectively provide moral education, the surrounding society must authentically care about it and work to reform itself.

What is required now, as educators and publishers proceed with the business of producing “moral ed” curriculum kits, and educators go on arguing about how moral education should be defined and what classroom teaching techniques it should employ, is for school principals, superintendents, faculties, representatives of pupils, parents, the community, and specialists to get together, in local and regional meetings, to focus on the question, How can our schools be restructured, in their core elements—grades, sports, teacher-pupil relations—to make them sources of ethical experiences, rather than, as they too often are, training grounds for cheating, intolerance, coping with bureaucratic or arbitrary authority?

The present period seems especially opportune for attempting such a change. We are now in an era in which, through a powerful combination of circumstances, various elements of society—from families to corporations to professions to government—have had to confront questions of ethicality, of trying to find ways to formulate and move toward higher standards of conduct. The schools can act either as an accelerator or a brake on this ethical drive.