The Role of Self-Discipline

by Amitai Etzioni

Character development deserves more attention in the education process, says Mr. Etzioni. Our future adults need help in developing the ability to mobilize and commit themselves — an ability that is developed in structured situations, not in authoritarian ones. Edward Wynne and Barbara Heyns provide two other points of view in their responses to his argument.

Photo by Marvin Ickow

AMITAI ETZIONI is University Professor at George Washington University, Washington, D.C. This article is based on Chapter 6 of his latest book, An Immodest Agenda *(New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982). ©1982, Amitai Etzioni.*

Much of the talk about the cognitive deficiencies exhibited by many U.S. pupils tends to focus on teaching methods (e.g., phonics versus sight-reading) and teaching resources (e.g., numbers and qualifications of teachers). Nobody claims that character development is not also important. However, from the pages of the *Kappan* to the staff meetings in my neighborhood public school, character development receives much less attention as a goal of schooling. Most important, character development is not typically seen as directly tied to cognitive achievement. I believe that one character trait, the level of self-discipline, is of central importance (accounts for much of the variance) both for cognitive achievement in school and for the level of performance in society as worker, citizen, and fellow human being. It deserves more attention from both researchers and educators.

To illustrate my thesis, let us look first at a simple incident. A young secretary, recently hired, was asked to use the Yellow Pages of the telephone directory. When she was unable to do so, it became evident that she did not command the alphabet or understand the principles of categorization and subcategorization involved.

Such inability would usually be counted as an example of a cognitive deficiency — an outcome of poor teaching, if not low I.Q. However, if we ask why it is difficult to teach someone a list of 26 items and the principles of a very simple index, we soon realize that something more is amiss than simple lack of teaching time and effort. Nor could this inability be related to I.Q. for most pupils, because learning the alphabet requires little comprehension or intelligence.

What would it take you to memorize, say, a telephone number of 26 digits? A considerable amount of effort, but *not* cognitive effort. Instead, this task would take concentration, control of impulse, self-motivation, and the ability to face and overcome stress (in order to resist distractions and accept the "routine" work involved). This element of psychic organization — the capacity to mobilize and commit psychic energy to a task — is what I hypothesize that those who are not learning well lack most. It is what seems to account for their "inability" to do elementary computation (i.e., to memorize a few rules and adhere to them) or to write a coherent expository paragraph (i.e., to remember the rules of punctuation, syntax, and so on).

In one public opinion survey after another, teachers and parents rank discipline as the number-one problem of the schools. This attention to discipline is highly relevant: It focuses on the school as a structure in which learning is to take place and suggests that — in a classroom where the proper relationships between pupils and their teachers and a proper learning atmosphere cannot be developed and maintained — learning is difficult, if not impossible.

Unfortunately, the focus on discipline is itself partially misdirected. Discipline, as most people understand it, is highly external. Teachers and principals "lay down the law" and will not brook back talk; students "show respect" by rising when their teacher enters the room, not speaking unless spoken to, and so on. But it seems to me that what many pupils — all of them future adults — need more of is *self-discipline*, i.e., the ability to mobilize and commit themselves. This self-discipline is developed in structured situations, not in authoritarian ones.

The line between structure and authoritarianism is easy to illustrate but not to define with great precision. Basically, what students need is not close, continuous external supervision but a school structure — authority figures, rules, and organization of tasks — that will build up their capacity to regulate themselves. This is best achieved, it seems, when what is required of the students is clearly explained and closely linked to educational goals, rather than arbitrarily announced, changed at will, and aimed as much at salving teachers' egos as at educational enhancement. To advance self-discipline requires that assignments be "do-able," appropriately evaluated, and rewarded.

self-disciplined and committed individual.

Several quite well-known bodies of data seem to lend plausibility to my thesis of the importance of self-discipline. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has found that, despite an improvement in scores on reading tests, the ability of junior high and high school students to draw inferences and to solve problems has declined. There are no compelling data to explain this decline. Excessive televiewing and a focus on "basic" skills at the expense of more advanced ones are two possible explanations among the 16 that the NAEP advanced. I suggest that this decline in higher-order skills also reflects a lack of intellectual self-discipline, because interpretation and application — much more than basic reading skills — require following certain rules (e.g., check out the primary alternatives, avoid premature conclusions) and a measure of patience. The NAEP data suggest to me that these attributes have declined. Of course, other factors may also play a role. For example, under most circumstances extensive televiewing develops neither the ability to think, nor the ability to think.

Another body of data that lends credence to my thesis comes from James S. Coleman's comparative study of public and private schools,[2] which stirred up a major controversy. As far as I can determine, Coleman's data suggest that effective schools, both private and public, have structures that enable them, first, to impose discipline, and second, to uphold academic standards. The single most important difference between effective schools and less effective ones proved to be the disciplinary structure. Coleman took into account such administrative measures as enforcement of a dress code and strictness in dealing with those who cut classes, were truant, or attacked teachers, but he also measured students' attitudes. He found that, in the higher-performance schools, most students accepted rules and regulations as legitimate. They thought that the discipline in their schools was effective and fair; they believed teachers' interest in them was relatively high; they did significantly more homework than students in the other schools (which both affected their achievements and reflected the effectiveness of the disciplinary structure); and — perhaps most revealing — they had high degrees of self-esteem.

Another large-scale study of school effectiveness, *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, was conducted in Great Britain.[3] Researchers found in this study that the single most important factor in pupils' achievement was the school's character as a social institution — its structure and the processes that administrators and teachers had established that schools that provided clear incentives and rewards, that gave priority to learning, and that gave students to carry out certain clearly defined responsibilities, the students performed better and attended more regularly than did their peers in other schools; they were also less involved in delinquent behavior outside of school. Moreover, those schools with clear and well-established standards of behavior and discipline helped to produce more students who performed better than did those schools in which teachers had to struggle alone to establish such standards.

The more successful schools in this study illustrate the difference between imposing discipline from above and creating the structural conditions that nurture the development of self-discipline. Teachers and administrators in the better schools respected students as responsible individuals and set high academic and behavioral standards for them. The students took over specific tasks in corridors, classrooms, and assemblies, for example. Their teachers provided many opportunities for independent classroom or library work; the implicit message was: "We trust you to use your time for productive, self-guided work." The teachers also carefully checked students' independent work and helped some youngsters to develop the study habits essential for such efforts. The point is that expecting students to take responsibility and to work independently encourages self-regulation instead of reliance on close supervision, which contributes to inadequate internalization of impulse control.

Another important finding of *Fifteen Thousand Hours* was that such positive sanctions as expressions of appreciation and praise are highly effective in motivating students, although teachers in the study did not use these tools often. Indeed, what the word *discipline* brings to mind most immediately is restraining and setting limits, not encouraging or promoting any specific positive behavior. But my own study of compliance in organizations, a reanalysis of some 1,100 studies of a large variety of organizations, from prisons to schools, also demonstrated clearly that involvement stemming from positive feelings is much more productive than the same degree of compliance attained by fear, pressure, or negative sanctions.[4] Educators must use both sides of the motivational scale; given the paucity of tools available to them, to give up either would undercut their capacity to discharge their duties. However, the more they can use positive motivation, the more likely they are to engender self-discipline among their students rather than superficial compliance, which lasts only as long as they are present to mete out punishment.

Of course, there are other factors that affect teachers' effectiveness. A community uninterested in or hostile toward learning, one lacking in successful role models (or rich in the wrong kinds), or one ravaged by such conditions as unemployment or crowded housing will deter learning. Teachers who are underpaid and who do not feel respected will not be paragons of instructional excellence. Extensive exposure to television seems to affect the academic performance of youngsters adversely. And there are some pupils — regardless of social class or race — who are well below average in intelligence or who display severe learning disabilities. Nonetheless, school structure is, in my view, the primary factor in school effectiveness. Cognitive deficiencies are secondary and often reflect nonschool factors in part. True, once cognitive deficiencies accumulate, they tend to pose personality problems, as evidenced by learning-disabled pupils who become disruptive. But studies of effective schools suggest that even children with cognitive problems will learn, when they can mobilize and commit themselves to the task.

If further research and deliberation were to support the pivotal importance of self-discipline to cognitive achievement, what should the schools do about it? Obviously, children's levels of
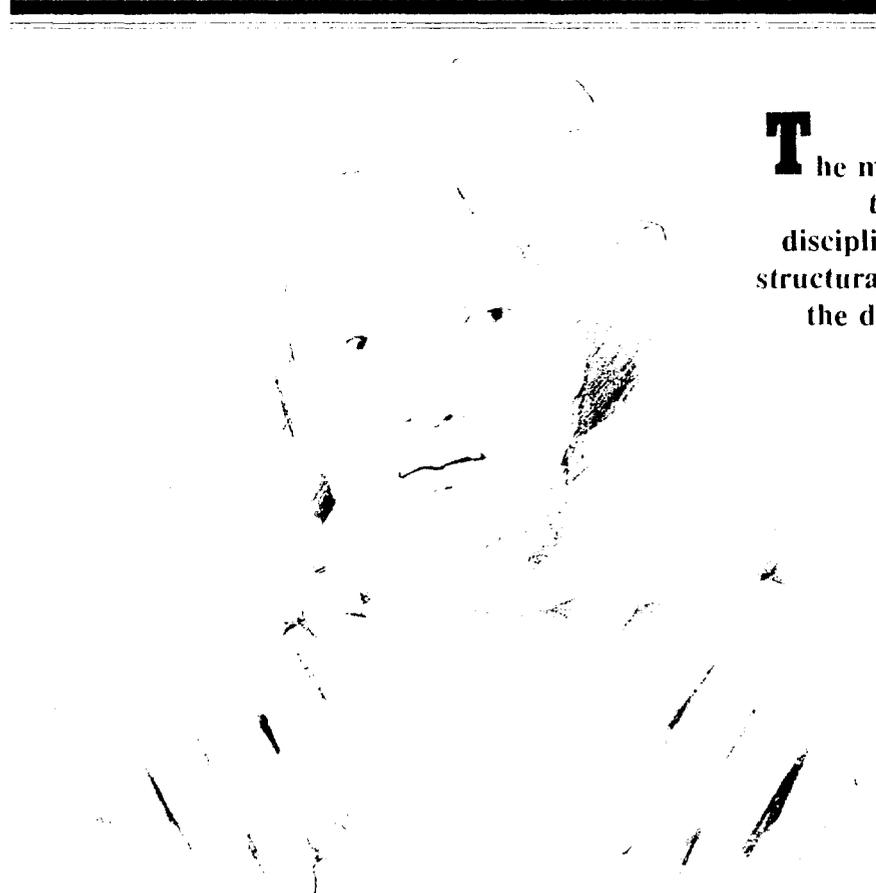
The more successful schools illustrate the difference between imposing discipline from above and creating the structural conditions that nurture the development of self-discipline.

Illustration by Roseann Hebeler

self-discipline are determined in part by their families, their peers, and their previous experiences. What schools can or cannot do is also determined to a large extent by the communities they serve. However, the schools themselves can take certain steps.

The first step is for teachers and administrators to analyze the school as a structure that provides a *set of experiences.* Don't view the school as simply teachers, pupils, classrooms, curriculum. Look instead for young people who are receiving rewards for work well done — who are finding that self-discipline and the achievements that spring from it are sources of social gratification, as long as they abide by the rules (e.g., compete fairly) and are sensitive to others (e.g., do not deride slower learners). Alternatively, look for teachers assigning work that the students either cannot handle or are not motivated to do, vandalism going unpunished, open selling of drugs, and the rewarding or punishing of students according to criteria other than achievement (such as staying out from underfoot, obeying without question, or simply coming from an affluent or socially preferred background).

Some educators talk about the merits of "learning by experience" rather than by lecture. They refer, by and large, to teaching methods that enhance cognitive learning. A child is likely to learn more

about Egyptian pyramids by building a small pyramid out of toy bricks than by a lecture, for example — even if the lecture is backed by visual aids. The educational experiences I endorse are imparted by life in school, and they affect most immediately the personality development, not the task-oriented learning, of students.

With typical disregard for this aspect of schools, David Moore has written in the *Harvard Educational Review* on "Discovering the Pedagogy of Experience." Moore seeks out-of-school, "community settings" that require students to be "engaged in activities in the real world."[5] He goes on to suggest, quite correctly, that these "social encounters" help participants learn "to organize their behavior,"[6] but — like so many other educators — he overlooks the significance of comparable in-school experiences.

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in Britain, under the direction of Elliott Jaques, has developed for industrial management a strategy for enhanced self-awareness and change that might well be applied to schools.[7] The Tavistock strategy does not attempt to introduce changes either from the outside (by directives, expert advice, and so on) or by meeting with some of the staff (e.g., the foremen). Instead, self-analysis and change come through dialog that starts with top management and works its way down the corporate hierarchy. This ap-

proach greatly increase the probability that the higher levels of r. agement will support, rather than hinder, change and that all levels will be involved and won over. Group therapists or other facilitators may participate — but only to enhance the process, not to dominate it.

In schools, this approach might entail working first with school boards and groups of superintendents, then principals, then teachers, and then Parent/Teacher Associations and students. A good way to start might be to discuss the experiences that schools now generate and to ask what these experiences *ought* to be — what educational outcomes are desired. The next step would be to ask how the desired changes can be achieved. Outside facilitators could help to prevent self-analysis from turning into defensive self-justification or mere gripe sessions.

Specifically, such a dialog should examine every school policy from the standpoint of how it works and how it *ought* to work. Are grades accorded only for academic achievement, or do they also reflect and thus encourage effort? And what are the criteria by which these grades are assigned? Are the pupils aware of these criteria, and do they consider them legitimate? Is grading fair or arbitrary?

Are school incidents — from rowdy behavior on a field trip to acts of vandalism — handled as custodial or disciplinary matters, largely ignored, or used as educational opportunities to build students' self-discipline? Are teachers under great pressure to improve students' scores on standardized tests and to pump knowledge more quickly into their pupils? Or are assignments in the content areas balanced with concern for character development and self-discipline?

As I see it, many families are not able to provide the necessary psychic foundations for character development, and those that do provide such foundations need the schools to reinforce their efforts and achievements. Only if the schools make character building, especially the promotion of self-discipline, a core item

RESPONSE

Rigorous Thinking About Character

by Edward A. Wynne

As editor of a newsletter called *Character II*, I am naturally pleased that Amitai Etzioni has emphasized the importance of character as an educational issue — and that he has also recognized its relative disregard by too many educators. As Etzioni properly observes, everyone is in favor of character, but all too often the topic does not receive rigorous attention. And, because the problem is complicated, it is likely to be mishandled when it is not subjected to careful deliberation. Unfortunately, Etzioni's own article is an example of this lack of deliberation. Let me support this strong charge and then suggest some of the characteristics of a more rigorous approach.

First, Etzioni expresses great concern about a secretary who could not use a telephone directory — an inability that he implies is due to lack of character. For most of human history, however, the traits typically associated with character have had little to do with cognitive skills such as using telephone directories. When we think about the connotations of character, we think of people who told the truth under temptation, made and kept commitments, were generous, were kind, and otherwise demonstrated what we think of as Boy Scout (or Girl Scout) virtues. Mental discipline is surely fine, but character is first emotional discipline — the ability to control our emotions so that they do not lead us to act against higher obligations.

Thus, when students experiment with or routinely use illegal drugs, it is proper to say that this represents a character deficiency: the inability to resist the immediate gratification of drug use. The same might be said of students who engage in vandalism, irresponsible sex, and so on. Bringing in the issue of mental discipline — regardless of the value of such discipline — obscures any discussion of character, which has more to do with arriving on time, continuing to work when no one is watching, and faithfully following directions.

Next, Etzioni goes astray on the topic of authority over the young. He is critical of "external discipline" and in favor of "self-discipline." He believes that what is required of students should be "explained," not "arbitrarily announced" or "changed at will." We should not have "excessive" memorization. Criteria should not be "irrelevant." To support his points, he refers to the Coleman report on public and private schools, which disclosed a positive relationship between discipline and academic performance. Students in the higher-performing schools in Coleman's study, Etzioni notes, found the discipline in their schools effective and fair; these students also had high degrees of self-esteem.

But Coleman's study was not concerned with whether the discipline imposed by the effective schools was externally imposed or self-imposed. He does not mention whether the students were significantly involved in developing the discipline codes. (From my own experience with schools that have strong discipline codes, such student input is usually only modest.) Whether the discipline was "relevant" is a theoretical question in part: Are dress codes relevant? Are good manners relevant? Is a no-holding-hands rule relevant? Or, to restate the question, are such prohibitions and requirements "arbitrary"? Somewhat similar questions can be raised about Etzioni's analysis of Michael Rutter's *Fifteen Thousand Hours.* That study recommends that schools develop "clear and well-established" standards. Such standards may — or may not — be arbitrary. It all depends on what we mean by such words as *relevant, want, arbitrary,* and *externally imposed.* Obviously, I feel that words such as these — unless they are better defined — are not very helpful. They make most of us feel "good," but they are overused buzz words that have lost their intellectual significance.

In trying to think about "character," I recommend that we stop dwelling on states of mind — such as "relevance" and "self-discipline" — and focus instead on observable conduct. Do students tell the truth under temptation, avoid vandalism, display tact and courtesy, practice generosity and charity, follow directions, attend school regularly, and come to class on time? If so, they are displaying good character. If schools are to enhance the character of students, they must provide occasions for the display of these virtues. Furthermore, schools should discourage the practice of those vices that are the obverse of these virtues: lying, vandalism, rudeness, selfishness, and lax attendance should be prohibited and punished. Conversely, students who conspicuously display virtue should be appropriately recognized and rewarded.

Of course, I have just sketched the most general elements of a pro-character school program. Nonetheless, it is significant that, even from this sketch, one can sense that such terms as *relevant, externally imposed,* and *arbitrary* are not of great import in this program. A pro-character program must first aim at producing certain visible effects. School officials should make modest efforts to explain to students why virtue is good and vice is bad. But the program should not stand or fall on whether these efforts are persuasive.

The real issue is whether the school staff can engage in enough planning and organization to establish the necessary rewards, punishments, and role models. As adults, we are familiar with innumerable institutions that effectively shape the character of their members without endlessly debating issues of arbitrariness and relevance. An important problem today is that too many schools have lost the courage to assert the appropriateness of legitimate adult authority — regardless of whether children or adolescents see it as democratic or relevant.

I understand that Etzioni believes that too much "arbitrary" discipline ma

EDWARD A. WYNNE is a professor in the College of Education, University of Illinois at Chicago, and editor of *Character Policy: An Emerging Issue* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Three National Assessments of Reading: Changes in Performance, 1970-80* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1981). See also Gene I. Maeroff, "Reading Skills: New Problems," *New York Times,* 10 April 1981, p. 19.

2. James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *Public and Private Schools,* preliminary draft (Washington, D.C.: Educational Resources Information Center, National Institute of Education, March 1981); and idem, "Public and Private Schools," *Society,* January/February 1982, pp. 4-9.

3. Michael Rutter, Barbara Maughan, Peter Mortimore, and Janet Ouston, with Alan Smith, *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

4. Amitai Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations,* rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1975).

5. May 1981, pp. 287-88.

6. Ibid., p. 289.

7. Elliot Jaques, *The Changing Culture of a Factory* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1951).

> **S**tudents who have graduated from schools with a strong focus on character are both obedient *and* adaptable. The learning that resulted from adhering to a rigid disciplinary code has enabled them to accept the inevitable restrictions of adulthood.

deter students from operating effectively in the adult world, where it is sometime; necessary to carry on without close supervision or clear direction. Here, in my view, he misinterprets the necessary developmental process. My impression, as a college teacher, is that students who have graduated from schools with a strong focus on character (as I use the word) are both obedient *and* adaptable. Their imaginations and flexibility are not injured because they had to follow a rigid disciplinary code between the ages of, say, 12 and 17. The learning that resulted from adhering to that code has simply enabled them to accept the many restrictions that inevitably arise in adult life — and to save their fights for the real issues. For all of our talk about freedom and adaptability in adult work, much of our time as adults is spent doing things that we'd rather have someone else do. At least, this is true about 75% of the time in my own work. Moreover, an important prerequisite for creativity is the amassing of facts — so that they can be manipulated creatively. First, however, we need facts.

Many of the character problems of adults with whom I come in contact demonstrate the themes I have been discussing. For example, a friend told me of a colleague who was so distraught over the firing of an associate that he had been unable to do any productive work for two or three months. Of course, as is the case in most discharges, there were pros and cons; thus a case might be made that the discharge was wrongful. Still, during his mourning period the worrier did not refuse his paycheck and continued to draw his salary. And his research, which might have been of help to others, was placed on hold. If this parable is viewed in the framework of character, the morals to draw are simple. If you accept a salary, keep working or quit. If your work is of use to other human beings, keep at it — even if there are other, more dramatic, concerns that threaten your concentration. By contrast, Etzioni's criteria encourage people to worry about whether the discharge was arbitrary or relevant (although no one will really know) and to feel justified when they take their paychecks without having earned them. All too often, priorities such as relevance and nonarbitrariness become masks to shield simple self-indulgence. Probably the better principle to foster character is: If you are distracted from your work, strive to avoid rationales that excuse such distraction.

In sum, I gladly welcome Etzioni to the club of worriers about character. If he gradually changes his focus from states of mind to observable conduct and relinquishes his buzz words, he will find his analysis more precise.