

Moral Education – Part 2

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Part 1 presented a case for moral education in schools and outlined theories of moral development. This part focuses on current approaches to moral education and provides suggestions for a model of moral education for schools in T&T.

Among the approaches found to have little impact on moral behaviour are lectures and exhortations, imposed codes of conduct, pledges, and systems of rewards and punishments. Useful approaches focus on moral reasoning, opportunities to exercise discretion and judgements, development of thinking skills through reflection on familiar moral issues, development of resilience to immoral enticements, and experience in performing humane tasks.

The traditional approach to moral education encourages conformance to conventional norms of behaviour, because qualities such as truthfulness and honesty are desirable for everyone. Emphasis is placed on the inculcation of virtuous traits and on tradition, authority, and obedience, rather than on the processes of moral reasoning. This approach has not been effective in influencing moral behaviour.

Another approach is the values clarification approach, where a neutral teacher provides opportunities for students to clarify and defend their values, that is, the principles that guide their behaviour. This approach has been criticised for its lack of explicit content, and for giving children too much power to make decisions about modes of conduct.

Drawing from Kohlberg, some programmes engage students in discussions on issues that arise from moral dilemmas. Hopefully, students should gravitate to positions manifest among their peers who function at a higher stage of Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. However, critics point out that merely thinking about moral issues will not necessarily affect one's moral behaviour.

Yet another approach is based on the development of resilience against negative social influences. This social influences approach relies on positive peer influences to develop awareness among students of the social factors that can apply pressure to lure youth towards immoral activities. Students critically examine society's power structure to discover the hidden agendas of the beneficiaries of immorality. In so doing, they may develop skills to resist negative influences.

Many writers suggest that students need to have experiences in caring for the less fortunate in order to see themselves as helpful and caring individuals. Class teachers and principals establish projects whereby groups of students adopt individuals in need and provide them with care and consideration.

Another approach to moral education is through religious instruction in specific faiths; however, some educators believe that this is the responsibility of the home or the church. More support has been found for religious education wherein comparative religion is studied to identify common moral themes. This approach can be useful in a multicultural society such as T&T.

The best moral education programmes can be jeopardised by contradictory experiences students have in schools and society. Consequently, school climate and the hidden curriculum should be attuned to the goals of moral education. (School climate refers to perceptions of students, parents, and teachers about a school, while the hidden curriculum is the impact of a school's priorities, relationships, and routines on teaching and learning.) Schools should support the goals of moral education by fostering a positive school climate, and ensuring that the processes of the school do not contradict these goals. However, it must be noted that the examples set by business, religious, and political leaders in the wider society can also support or hinder the success of moral education.

The most promising model of moral education for T&T is an eclectic model that draws selectively from prevailing approaches. We need to have a needs analysis to identify issues of morality that are of primary concern to T&T. Because the conscience develops from infancy, moral education should be introduced in early childhood. Certainly, in our multicultural society there is need for a model of religious education that addresses religion comparatively and identifies common moral themes across religions. Utilising an infusion approach, moral issues should be examined critically, and students should investigate the hidden agendas of negative social influences from the perspective of the regular school subjects. However, it must be appreciated that infusion cannot occur haphazardly, so that curricula would require revision to accommodate moral goals and objectives. Beyond infusion, students should be engaged in projects to provide care for the unfortunate as part of the learning experiences provided by our schools. However, all of these activities can come to naught if the processes of the school and the moral example of national leaders contradict the goals of moral education.

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