

Seven Worlds of Moral Education

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Character education is often regarded as synonymous with moral education. But, Ms. Joseph and Ms. Efron point out, it is only one of many possible approaches, each based on different assumptions about best practice, about learners, and about morality itself.

In his striking critique of character education, Alfie Kohn suggests that educators might want to “define our efforts to promote children’s social and moral development as an alternative” to character education.¹ In this article, we address Kohn’s question “What does the alternative look like?” by describing the aims, practices, advantages, and difficulties of seven worlds of moral education—of which character education is only one. Lastly, we consider why character education should be the dominant approach to moral education in the United States when there are inspiring alternatives.

Viewing moral education as comprising various “moral worlds” helps us to imagine classrooms and schools that consistently support the beliefs, values, and visions that will shape students into adults and determine the world they will make. In such environments, moral education is a coherent endeavor created with purpose and deliberation. Educators in moral worlds believe that they must

create a process through which young people can learn to recognize values that represent prosocial behaviors, engage in actions that bring about a better life for others, and appreciate ethical and compassionate conduct.

We describe below the moral worlds of character education, cultural heritage, caring community, peace education, social action, just community, and ethical inquiry. These worlds do not exist in isolation, nor are their purposes diametrically opposed; they may, in fact, share several characteristics. Classrooms and schools can also create coherent hybrid approaches that combine aspects of several moral worlds. Nonetheless, to clarify and foster conversations about moral education, we explore these approaches to social and ethical development as distinct moral worlds.

CHARACTER EDUCATION

The moral world of character education rests on the conviction that schooling can shape the behavior of young people by inculcating in them the proper virtues. Proponents of this world argue that children need clear directions and good role models and, implicitly, that schools should shape character when families are deficient in this task. Advocates also recommend giving students numerous opportunities to do good deeds, such as taking part in service learning, which they believe will eventually lead to moral habits. Moreover, character educators believe in establishing strong incentives for good behavior.²

To no small extent, *The Book of Virtues*, by William Bennett, influences many character education programs. The virtues Bennett describes are “self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance,

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honesty, loyalty, and faith.” Another strong influence is Character Counts, a coalition that posits “six pillars of character”: 1) be honest; 2) treat others with respect; 3) do what you are supposed to do; 4) play by the rules; 5) be kind; and 6) do your share to make your school and community better. Communities have also developed their own sets of traits or rules that guide character education programs.³

How do schools create a moral world using character traits as starting points? First, modeling virtuous behavior is a key component of character education programs—teachers, administrators, and students are instructed to be role models. Many schools call attention to character traits in public forums and displays such as assemblies, daily announcements, bulletin boards, and banners, as well as in the study of history and literature. School 18 in Albany, New York, uses “positive reinforcement of good character traits” through a Kids for Character program. “Students who are ‘caught’ doing something that shows good character have their names posted where the entire school community can see. Then, each Friday, those students are called to the office to receive a reward.”⁴

Schools may emphasize a different character trait each month in curricular content and assemblies. In the Kent City Schools in Ohio, November is “compassion” month. In social studies classes, students “study those who immigrated to this country at great personal sacrifice, develop a school or community service project, and research the Underground Railroad and consider how people extended help to those escaping slavery.” Self-control is the trait for December. In physical education classes, students “devise an exercise chart to help monitor personal fitness.” In language arts, they “keep a personal journal of times self-control was used.” And in math classes, they “graph the number of times students hand in assignments on time.” Teachers may also infuse their classroom management strategies and lessons with respect for aspects of character.⁵

A strength of the character education moral world is educators’ belief that it is their responsibility to form character rather than remain indifferent to their students’ moral development. Another positive aspect of this approach is the goal of proponents to infuse character education throughout the curriculum and school environment in order for students to experience the consistency of a moral world both academically and socially.

However, character education raises a number of critical questions that its advocates have not satisfactorily addressed. Are behavioral traits in fact the same as moral character? Do displays of virtues or desired traits truly encourage moral behavior? Does the posting of character traits on banners and bulletin boards result in a “marquee mentality” and therefore not reach the hearts and minds of young people? Is character education merely indoctrination of dominant cultural standards that may not represent

the values of diverse communities? And finally, do the values chosen by character educators reflect the status quo and encourage compliance with it?⁶

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Like character education, the moral world of cultural heritage emphasizes values. These values, however, are not those of the mainstream but, instead, are drawn from the traditions of nondominant cultures. Unlike character education, there are no underlying assumptions that schools may have better values than those of communities and families or that schools need to instill character traits in children that may run counter to students’ own cultural values. In the cultural heritage moral world, the spheres of school, home, and community are interconnected. Parents, elders, and cultural leaders educate children within and outside the walls of the school. Moreover, students learn cultural traditions and values not through direct instruction but by deep understanding of and participation in the culture’s arts and ceremonies.

One embodiment of the cultural heritage world is the values instruction offered in Afrocentric schools. For example, the mission statement of the African American Academy for Accelerated Learning in Minneapolis affirms the importance of “reconnecting African American families to their cultural heritage, spirituality and history.” The mission of the African American Academy, a public school in Seattle, is to instruct students in a way that “embraces the history, culture and heritage of African and African American people by studying and putting into practice the seven principles of Nguzo Saba: Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity), and Imani (Faith).” Afrocentric schools emphasize parent involvement. In a report to the Kansas City Missouri Board of Education, the African Centered Education Task Force affirmed the African proverb “It takes an entire village to raise just one child” by giving parents an essential role in African-centered schools as “partners of the village.”⁷

Native American schools that teach language, customs, and history also create the moral world of cultural heritage. In Native American education, cherished values include “respect [for] people and their feelings, especially respecting elders, and living in harmony with nature.” Schools are imbued with a “sense of empathy and kinship with other forms of life” and a belief that “there should be no division between school climate and culture and family and community climate and culture.” Parents and elders are present throughout the school, and students and teachers are expected to be in the community and the natural environ-

ment as well as in the classroom. The Tulalip Heritage School in Washington State (jointly sponsored by the public school district, the Boys and Girls Club, and the Tulalip Tribe) transmits its ethos to the students by having them learn the stories of ancestors, cultivating respect for Native American culture and “respect for one another,” and recognizing the importance of community. The NAWAYEE Center School, an alternative high school in Minneapolis, offers cultural classes that “include art, spirituality, family, community, and oral traditions” but also strives to ensure that “American Indian cultural values and beliefs are modeled and integrated throughout the entire curriculum.”⁸

The cultural heritage moral world has a number of advantages. Cultural heritage schools demonstrate respect for the cultures of their students by not just paying lip service to cultural diversity but being seriously committed to the sustenance of cultures. Partnerships with communities and meaningful parent involvement create active stakeholders in these schools and foster greater commitment to education. Continuity between the culture of the home and that of the school allows for moral instruction to use familiar patterns of communication, both verbal and nonverbal. As they learn through culturally congruent education, students do not experience a disjunction between their families’ and schools’ moral instruction. Furthermore, students have opportunities to learn more about their communities’ moral values through the study of their history and culture, so moral learning is embedded within academic scholarship.⁹

A difficulty in implementing this model of moral education is its dependence on educators who come from the students’ cultures or who themselves have deep knowledge of the culture. Districts clearly must do all that is possible to attract such educators and to sponsor community members in teacher preparation programs. Also, although all schools benefit from parents’ and elders’ participation, a fully realized moral world of cultural heritage would be most desired in certain schools or districts in which a significant percentage of the students are from one ethnic culture. It is crucial, however, to be sensitive to the concerns of the community. This model of moral education cannot be imposed upon a community, but it should be provided if the community so desires. Moreover, a focus on the cultural heritage of a community in no way precludes the need to learn the skills required for success in the dominant culture. Indeed, all the schools mentioned here also have a strong academic focus.

CARING COMMUNITY

The caring community emphasizes the ethic of care—nurturing, closeness, emotional attachment, and respectful, mutually supportive relationships. This moral world also

focuses on the social and emotional health of all its community members. As the individuals in the classroom and the school begin to feel like a family, the school’s institutional image is replaced by that of a home. Educators’ moral influence stems from their caring relationships with students, parents, and one another. In the caring community, students are not rewarded for individual empathic actions; instead, these behaviors are considered the norm of the classroom culture.¹⁰

Accounts of schools as caring communities describe how teachers, administrators, parents, and students feel that they are members of a community. In these schools, class size is small, teachers are mentored, and all staff members feel and demonstrate genuine concern for students. In the classroom, nurturing peer relationships develop as students care for one another through informal and planned activities and structures such as buddy systems.¹¹

In academics, the theme of caring is introduced through service learning projects and the study of literature that accentuates interpersonal and intercultural understanding. The classroom environment features discussions and cooperative learning activities and is defined not by rules but by how students feel about being in the class and being with one another. For example, at the Russ School in California, children developed a list of “Ways We Want to Be in Room Eight” as their classroom rules rather than a list of prohibitions.¹²

Inclusiveness is another theme in the caring community, as schools welcome and nurture diverse populations, including special education students. For instance, when the Lincoln Center Middle School in Milwaukee chose to become a caring community, it expressed caring by selecting students by means of a lottery for all who were interested in its arts-based curriculum rather than by holding auditions or having specific admissions requirements. This moral world also features schoolwide activities that involve parents and community members. Moreover, families and school personnel communicate with one another about students’ academic progress, social development, and emotional health.¹³

The caring community has numerous benefits for students. Researchers from the Developmental Studies Center Child Development Project report that children educated in such schools perceive their classrooms as fair, safe, caring places that are conducive to learning. Once more, students “with a strong sense of community [are] more likely to act ethically and altruistically, develop social and emotional competencies, avoid drug use and violent behavior, and [be] academically motivated.” Emotional well-being is the catalyst for moral development in the caring community. As students feel respected and cared for in loving classroom and school environments, they are less likely to act out “from feelings of inferiority, cynicism, or egocentrism that

blind them to others' feelings." Furthermore, students who are nurtured are more likely to expand their sphere of caring from friends, teachers, and families to others in their communities.¹⁴

Difficulties for educators who wish to create a caring community occur when school culture—large class size, disruptive pullout programs, and a history of not welcoming families—thwarts the building of caring relationships. Although educators may strive to create a caring classroom, students and teachers may feel “uncared for” when the school environment is hostile. Unfortunately, the students most in need of caring often have schools whose resources cannot support this moral world.¹⁵

PEACE EDUCATION

The moral world of peace education stems from an ethic of care that extends beyond the classroom. Moral commitments underpinning peace education include valuing and befriending the Earth, living in harmony with the natural world, recognizing the interrelatedness of all human and natural life, preventing violence toward the Earth and all its peoples, and learning how to create and live in a culture of peace. Peace education promotes “awareness of the interdependence of all things and a profound sense of responsibility for the fate of the planet and for the well-being of humanity.”¹⁶

The components of peace education include:

- conflict resolution—developing skills and appreciation for nonviolent problem solving;
- peace studies—examining the causes of war and its prevention and participating in activities that focus on the meaning of peace and raise peace awareness;
- environmental education—developing an appreciation of and the desire to inquire into the interrelationships of humans, their cultures, their surroundings, and all forms of life;
- global education—recognizing the interdependent nature of the world and studying problems and issues that cut across national boundaries; and
- human rights education—learning about the universal rights of human beings and strengthening respect for fundamental freedoms.¹⁷

Although many U.S. schools teach violence-reduction skills, few create a holistic moral world that makes a connection between peaceful personal behaviors and promoting peace throughout the world. Maria Montessori's belief that education can contribute to world peace has been a profound influence on some schools that emphasize her vision. One World Montessori School in California is an ex-

ample of a school devoted to peace as an ultimate moral goal. In its K-8 peace curriculum, “teachers assist the children in developing a common language of peace and work on their own communication, peace making, and peace keeping skills.”¹⁸

Another school that teaches for peace and interconnectedness is the Global Village School in California, which develops materials for home-schoolers. Its “Peacemakers” course “presents role models who work to enact nonviolent social change and concrete examples of such successfully enacted change.” And the peace awareness curriculum of the New School at South Shore, a public primary school in Seattle, is inspired by the school's mission to “view each child as a bright spirit on a magnificent journey in our quest to contribute powerfully to the healing of humanity and Mother Earth.” The goal of the Environmental and Adventure School, a public school in Washington State, is to develop responsible citizens who are stewards of the Earth. This school's mission is based on the belief that “when students are out in their environment and learn to respect and care for their surroundings, they also learn to respect and care for their classmates and teachers.” The theme of “interdependent relationships—people and environments” is woven into the junior high school curriculum both in the classroom and in the many natural settings nearby.¹⁹

Peace educators teach that all lives and actions matter and that students are connected to all of life through a vision of peace, harmony, and Earth stewardship. Peace educators aim to create “moral sensitivity to others in the immediate classroom [and] concern for local communities and for all life on the planet.” Thus the greatest advantage of this moral world is that it nourishes students' desire for personal meaning in increasingly violent times. An academic benefit is that peace education can be integrated into a stimulating curriculum that covers all disciplines, including science, language, and history.²⁰

Creating an integrated peace education curriculum is difficult within traditional education systems in which content is taught in discrete disciplines. The greatest hurdle to creating this moral world, however, is the potential for conflict with community values. Undoubtedly, teaching about justice, sustainability, and peace challenges the prevailing world view in the U.S. by promoting values that confront uncontrolled economic development, consumerism, and militarism.

SOCIAL ACTION

In the moral world of social action, the values of justice and compassion guide a curriculum focused on the political nature of society. Educators believe that students are both empathic human beings and social agents who are capable

of effecting change by critically examining unjust situations and participating in political processes. Teachers encourage students to ask, “What should I be paying attention to in my world?” The social action approach taps students’ idealism for bringing about a better world—to “heal, repair and transform the world.”²¹

Students are encouraged to generate ideas, negotiate subject matter, and find learning resources outside of the school setting. They venture into the community to gather documents, conduct interviews, and make observations. Teachers believe that their role is to confront students’ ignorance or prejudices by helping the students to understand both privilege and oppression and by cultivating a “critical consciousness” of the perspectives of others.²²

An example of this moral world occurred at Nova Alternative High School, a public school in Seattle. A junior who works with a human rights group told her classmates and teachers about the difficult situation in East Timor. In response, students began meeting once a week to study East Timor’s history, politics, and culture and to raise money for Kay Rala, a small high school in Manatuto that “was burned to the ground by Indonesian soldiers in the late 1990s.” Rather than donating money to a charity, the Seattle students established direct contact with Kay Rala and developed a fund-raising system with the students in East Timor. The Seattle students raised thousands of dollars for the school. The student whose concerns sparked the project reported that her “world [had] opened up”—helping her “not only to see people who are less fortunate but instead of accepting dreary situations, to change them.”²³

Another account of the social action moral world is from a fifth-grade class in Aurora, Colorado. When her students were studying the Civil War, teacher Barbara Vogel explained to her pupils that slavery was not merely a defunct system from a bygone era in American history but that people in Sudan and elsewhere were enslaved in the present day. Although the children were horrified and distraught, Vogel did not try to comfort them or to rationalize such horrors. Instead, she sought to channel their feelings of concern and outrage into social action by helping her students start a letter-writing campaign to bring this dire situation to the public’s attention. When their letters did not change the fate of Sudanese slaves, the children raised money to buy freedom for a few slaves. As newspapers publicized the children’s efforts, donations came in from around the world, and the class eventually purchased the freedom of more than 1,000 people. The class even developed a website to encourage others to stop slavery in Sudan.²⁴

A highlight of the social action world is its integrated curriculum—rich in academic, social, and political knowledge—which reflects the moral concerns of children and adolescents. Educators report that students learn to view themselves as social and political beings with the right to

access the systems of influence in communities and the larger world. Through involvement in social action, students come to believe in themselves as moral agents.²⁵

Creating this moral world is not without challenges. Teachers are responsible for creating an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable voicing their moral concerns and ensuring that students’ ideas are not dismissed. Also, it requires a contemporary, integrated curriculum not constrained by rigid disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, despite the opportunities to make a difference, the social action moral world requires students to encounter misery and critically analyze the reasons for unjust acts and conditions. Accordingly, can students resist pessimism when they cannot easily change the world?

JUST COMMUNITY

In the just community moral world, classrooms and schools become democratic settings that provide students with opportunities to deliberate about moral dilemmas and to participate in cooperative decision making. Students, teachers, and administrators openly discuss and address matters of mutual concern, construct the school community’s policies and rules through procedures that are viewed as fair and just, and resolve moral conflicts. In the process of building community, students gain perspectives on the principles of justice and fairness by experiencing moral deliberations and by applying the principles to real and specific problems in the school community.²⁶

The just community model, based on the ideas of Lawrence Kohlberg, holds that the goal of moral education is the enhancement of students’ development from lower to higher stages of moral reasoning. Advocates for the just community assert that students influence their own moral development by deliberating about and seeking to resolve moral conflicts. Social interactions—i.e., lived moral dilemmas—advance learners’ moral judgment as students clarify and refine their thoughts while listening and responding to other points of view. In such environments, “teachers and students engage in philosophical deliberation about the good of the community.” Teachers can prepare even young students to participate in a just community by encouraging them to think about rules not as “immutable laws” but as constructed moral guidelines necessary for living in a community.²⁷

Two examples of just community schools are in New York State: the Pablo Neruda Academy for Architecture and World Studies in the Bronx and the Scarsdale Alternative School. Both public high schools emphasize students’ deliberation about moral dilemmas within real-world situations—freedom combined with responsibility, cooperation over competition, and “how to balance the

needs of individuals with those of the community.” Features of these schools include community meetings, in which decisions are made about essential school policy; fairness committees, in which conflicts among students or students and teachers are resolved; and advisories, in which students discuss their own problems and plan the agendas for community meetings.²⁸

An advantage of the just community is its unequivocal naming of justice as a safeguard of individuals’ rights and the community’s well-being. The ideal of democracy is both a moral standard and a guiding light, raising awareness of good citizenship within a moral context. Finally, students learn that their views and actions make a difference because their moral inquiries do not seek to resolve hypothetical situations or to prepare them for life outside of school but are focused on the school itself.²⁹

One problem with the just community approach is that it takes a great deal of time for students to develop real trust among themselves and to deliberate about and resolve issues. Another difficulty is that most teachers have not been trained to facilitate “an apprenticeship in democracy.” Finally, truly democratic school cultures with shared authority have been exceedingly rare, and this moral world cannot exist without students’ uninhibited conversations and real decision-making authority.³⁰

ETHICAL INQUIRY

In the world of ethical inquiry, moral education is a process by which students engage in “moral conversation” centered on dilemmas. Also influenced by Lawrence Kohlberg’s theories, this ethical inquiry approach to moral education is grounded on the premise that deliberation promotes students’ moral development. Within respectful, egalitarian, and carefully facilitated discussions, teachers invite students to investigate values or actions and to imagine alternatives. In this world, students consider “how human beings should act,” “life’s meaning and the human place in the world,” “the sources of evil and suffering,” and “universal existential concerns and ways of knowing such as the meaning of friendship, love, and beauty.”³¹

Teachers guide discussions on the moral dilemmas embedded within subjects across the curriculum. Springboards for ethical inquiry include literature, history, drama, economics, science, and philosophy. In particular, students learn about the consequences of making moral decisions and how fictional characters and real people make choices when aware that a moral question is at stake. Through this process of inquiry, students ponder the effects that moral, immoral, and amoral actions have on themselves and others, empathize with and appreciate the perspectives of others (their classmates as well as fictional

characters or historical figures), and construct their understanding of what it means to be a moral human being.³²

There are numerous accounts of how teachers integrate moral inquiry into their literature, social studies, and science classrooms—illustrating that most topics have ethical dimensions. Teachers also use published curricula, such as *Philosophy for Children*, that provide stories and other media for ethical deliberation. Facing *History and Ourselves*, a curriculum about 20th-century genocide, focuses on teaching middle and high school students “the meaning of human dignity, morality, law, citizenship, and behavior.” This curriculum aims to help students learn to reason morally as they think about their individual decisions and behavior toward others.³³

A value of the ethical inquiry world is that it is not an “add-on” program but rather a way to integrate genuine moral deliberation into all academic areas—becoming a norm of the classroom culture. Ethical inquiry provides opportunities for students to appreciate others’ viewpoints and to bring different perspectives into their own deliberations—important skills for democratic citizenship. This moral world also capitalizes on the process of identity development, making the search for moral identity an explicit goal.³⁴

Because it is a process of inquiry and negotiation, a criticism of ethical inquiry is that it does not explicitly teach values. Teachers act as important intellectual role models who care about their students’ ideas and their construction of personal ethics, but they do not overtly advocate particular moral standards. Another concern is ethical inquiry’s cognitive approach to moral education. Educators do not guide students to help others or to bring about a better society but instead trust that students who think ethically will actively participate in the world beyond the classroom.

CHOOSING A MORAL WORLD

Our description of seven worlds of moral education reveals that there is “no perfect world.” All moral worlds have their limitations, and educators face challenges no matter which approach they take to moral education. How then do we select a moral world for classrooms and schools?

Educators face hard choices, but choose they must, as these seven worlds hold dissimilar assumptions about what constitutes best practice for moral education. These worlds also reveal different conceptions of learners. They posit that moral educators can think about students as material to be shaped, as feelers with emotional needs, as thinkers whose judgments can be stimulated, or as villagers who learn from elders. Indeed, these moral worlds hold different understandings of morality itself. Does morality mean having good character, nurturing peers,

caring for those who suffer (those both near and far), or being stewards of the Earth?

Serious ethical deliberation about the aims and practices of moral education cannot be avoided. It would be a mistake to try to create an approach to moral education that represents the “best of all worlds,” because forming an amalgam of many approaches is more likely to result in a haphazard environment in which students receive conflicting messages. Moral educators need to decide on one approach or to create a thoughtfully considered hybrid that has clear aims and coherent practices. Too often, consideration of moral education (as well as any aspect of education) focuses only on the inadequate question of what works rather than on what we define as our utmost hopes for our students and the society in which they will live. When we ask the moral question, not merely the operational one, we allow ourselves to imagine our students having lives of meaning, taking part in genuine and peaceful relationships, and living without violence, cynicism, and despair.

The most popular world of moral education at present is character education. Numerous politicians, organizations, and boards of education advocate its implementation. Yet, as we explore these seven moral worlds, we see that character education has the most limited vision of morality and moral education—despite its advocates’ good intentions.

How do we compare naming “the trait of the month” to teaching children to have a deep appreciation for peace and for sustaining the Earth? Why should we select stories in the hope that students will assimilate certain values or emulate heroes when we can teach literature as a springboard for pondering moral dilemmas and developing moral identities? Why should we settle for posting the names of “good” children on a bulletin board when we can aim to create loving, familial classrooms or a village of moral educators? How do we equate mandated service learning with a thoughtfully conceived student-led effort of social action, not only to alleviate suffering but also to stop cycles of poverty and injustice?

We question why the dominant approach to moral education consists of the practice of giving rewards to students just for following rules and for occasional acts of kindness. Instead, should we not help students to engage in profound ethical deliberation, revere peace, be cared for and be caring, and develop as moral agents who can repair the world? Why are these not among the endorsed goals of moral education?

In conclusion, the other six moral worlds hold more humane, imaginative, and profound visions of morality and moral education than those of character education. These compelling alternatives deserve serious consideration on the part of educators.

NOTES

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3. William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). The six ethical values of the Character Counts Youth Ethics Initiative can be found at www.charactercounts.org/defsix.htm. The Kent City Schools in Ohio developed a list of character virtues: cooperation, self-control, trustworthiness, tolerance, compassion, commitment and dedication, work ethic and responsibility, respect for self and others, fairness and justice, and respect for our community and environment, which is available at <http://kent.k12.oh.us/kcs/cep/traits.php>.
4. For information on the School 18 program, see www.albanyschools.org/Schools/school18/school18program.htm.
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 18. For information on the One World Montessori School, see www.oneworldmontessori.org.
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