Moral Thought in Educational Practice

This book demonstrates how pervasive moral thought can be in educational thought and practice. By analyzing research on the moral and intellectual qualities in curriculum, as well as the integration of personhood and citizenship development in classroom work, this book demonstrates the primacy of the moral in various educational settings. With an additional emphasis on morality as it pertains to teaching as a vocation, Moral Thought in Educational Practice examines the objectives of teacher education and offers an account of moral purposes within the knowledge base for teaching.

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This book brings together ideas in my work over forty years, but it is not merely a collection of published papers. In each case where I have used previous work, there have been amendments or extensions and all the chapters contain unpublished material.

However, I am grateful to the following for permission to use the following sources:

2) Routledge Publishers:
   a) edited versions of chapters in Part II of, Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning; The Primacy of Dispositions: (2012)
   b) extracts from ‘The Moral and Epistemic Purposes of Teacher Education’, in The Handbook of Research on Teacher Education, (2008) and
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7) To Metropolitan Universities for material from my Levels of Partnership paper in Chapter 8.
I am in debt to audiences across a number of years in conference presentations at The American Educational Research Association, the Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, and the Philosophy of Education Society here in the USA. I was also fortunate to give a set of lectures in 1997 at the University of Alberta at Edmonton, hosted by Max Van Manen; at the University of the West Indies in 1989, and at the Philosophy for Educational Renewal Group in London in 2014 and 2015. My colleagues and teacher-students at the Institute for Educational Transformation at George Mason University provided comments and ideas over a seven-year period, especially Mark Jacobs, Pamela LePage, Betsy DeMulder and Diane Wood. I am also most grateful to Richard Pring, Elizabeth Campbell, Conal Condren, Bernard Barker and Chris Ormell for their friendship and help in these efforts to articulate what we all regard of great importance. I have been fortunate to have encountered many scholars, two of whom were of particular importance: Richard Peters who supervised my dissertation and Philip Jackson who hosted me as a Visiting Scholar at the Benton Center, University of Chicago in the Fall of 1986. While in Chicago, I gave a doctoral seminar on Moral Professionalism which focused my thoughts about moral matters after several years as an academic administrator. Members of the seminar included Kal Alston, Rene Arcilla, Bob Boostrom and David Hansen each of whom have become leaders in the field of Philosophy of Education and whose comments then helped my sense of direction enormously.

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Polarization and the ‘post-truth’ social and political environment creates the harshest challenge to teaching since the advent of public education. The former stills controversy. The latter leaves only violence as a way of solving differences when reason and truth are abandoned. Too many leaders in public life seem to have lost any sense of moral responsibility, as they do not see veracity as a moral virtue. This disastrous development for democratic society is not on the direct agenda for this book, but we should recognize that academic voices have laid the groundwork for ‘post-truth’ — from Ayer’s dogmatic empiricism and the complexities of Rorty’s conversationalism to those sociologists and their heirs who stress relativism through asserting the dominance of the cultural origins of ‘knowledge(s),’ thereby sapping confidence in cross-tribal discourse. Truth is not abandoned just because the notion that truth as objective certainty is rejected. Rather, in Popper’s phrase, truth is a regulative ideal, implying that knowledge is provisional, always open to correction. Most claims to knowledge in the form of propositional statements thus have to be judged through the prism of truth. ‘Post-truth,’ if widely thought to be correct (though not, of course, true) would have apocalyptic educational and social consequences.

This educational challenge is at once moral and epistemological. First, our knowledge and our discourse, how we think and how we work in education, is dependent on the language and the conceptual and normative structures we possess. Those concepts and structures contain views of the nature of the child, and what education is for. Behaviorism, for example, gave us ‘stimulus-response’ and ‘feedback,’ and Progressivism the ‘project’ and ‘developmentally appropriate practice.’ More recently management theories have begun to change the description of the teacher-learner ‘interface.’ Second, these discourses and the perspectives they imply may or may not be couched in moral terms, however much they avoid them. The importance of moral discourse is a constant refrain in philosophical thought about education. That importance lies a) in that teaching and learning is necessarily a relationship open to moral criteria, b) in that the ends of the enterprise are the development of persons,
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however described, and c) in that means to achieve those ends are also subject to moral evaluation. Teaching is primarily and pervasively a moral endeavor to which all different conceptual structures must be subservient: that implies a rejection of the view that the moral is merely a dimension of the educational task. The formal purpose of education is to make individuals better: what counts as ‘better’ is itself a moral question once we are prepared to handle the very real differences of perspective through reason. What needs to be shown is how pervasive moral language and concepts can illuminate educational processes to the extent that moral claims can be judged in the light of truth as a regulative ideal.

However, the fundamental requirement of the democratic life is that, as far as possible, people act freely and are able to choose how they can live their lives autonomously as moral agents. We thus require a democratic polity, not because it is perfect, but because, as Karl Popper (1962, chapter 7, p. 121) would have put it, its systems prevent those who want power from doing too much damage. However, a democratic polity also provides the political basis for human flourishing, for being free, being able to choose, being autonomous, but these are not natural endowments of the human being. So, we need a social and political environment and institutions through which moral capacities and dispositions can be fostered through education, as well as helping learners to get the appropriate knowledge and skill to become free, autonomous, choosing moral agents. That will include the ability to recognize the dangers of ‘post-truth.’

Tribalism, however, is a feature of most modern democracies. Educational practice needs to be practically committed to the democratic ideal of universalism, illustrated in notions of equality before the law, human rights and universal suffrage. This is an internal challenge within schools, especially in a multi-cultural society, but also externally, i.e. in the arrangements made to avoid re-segregation of educational institutions. For we need all our children to be educated as persons with democratic attitudes. Such a requirement underpins all the different possible kinds of curriculum, traditional or progressive, ancient or modern. This is true even of strictly vocational programs because through any kind of program one’s personal identity is being enhanced. But the pedagogical requirements for attaining these kinds of goals and purposes with children are not clear and uncomplicated, which gives them a central place in democratic discourse.

Too often, however, the moral in educational thought is relegated to a concern only with the development of the student’s character, the acquisition of personal autonomy and responsibility and the practical task of eliminating bad behavior, drugs, teenage pregnancy and the gamut of social ills to which the young may be prey. That seems a limited view. This book seeks to spell out how much more pervasive moral thought is in educational thought and practice.
Part I sets out a framework for educational thought and practice. Chapter 1 examines how moral language is needed to promote research and reflection, through exploration of a highly influential view of the knowledge base of teaching. That leads in Chapters 2 and 3 to a sustained account of knowledge, public and personal. Chapter 2 notices the weaknesses in the intellectual condition of the contemporary undergraduate as a basis for connecting the conditions of knowledge to the three intellectual virtues of truthfulness, open-mindedness and impartiality. It ends with a claim that truth is the anchor, even in consideration of diverse cultural perspectives. Chapter 3 extends the discussion of knowledge to personal knowledge, characterizing the person as a historical, belief-holding and self-conscious individual, each indicating congruent virtues—commitment, courage and strength of will, yielding comments on the student as a citizen. In Part II, the emphasis shifts to teaching and educational purposes in three different dimensions. Chapter 4 illustrates how distinct educational purposes may be through a description of what the model teacher would be, in terms of a scholar, a nurturer and a clinician. Chapter 5 then describes the moral professional through arguing for distinctions between personality traits, dispositions and virtues, and followed by an account of the specific virtues of intellect and character. Yet the teacher needs to be situated, morally speaking, within the scope of the authority exercised and the anticipation of freedom. The claim, based in Berlin’s account of positive liberty, is that the teacher will achieve freedom epistemologically which will then assist in the handling of prejudice (and diverse classrooms) in the context of the teacher’s moral authority.

Finally, in Part III, the focus turns to policy and institutions. The relationships of schools as institutions with parents is fraught with moral issues, not least in matters of school choice. The argument is that, since the conceptualization of the parent as consumer or client is insubstantial, viewing parents as partners is significant morally, whatever the difficulties of its implementation, given the race for positional goods and career expectations by schools, parents and children. However, institutional partnerships examined in Chapter 8 provide challenges to institutional integrity, but they are dependent on how the partnerships are conceptualized. Yet institutions need to be aware of the pervasive weaknesses found in deceits and secrets. In Chapter 9, the question raised at the beginning of the book “How should we bring up our children?” is examined from three non-exclusive perspectives, each of which illustrates the important of moral thought. First is the widespread use of Ritalin and other metamphetamines seen from the two perspectives of psychologist and educator. Second is the extent of a teacher’s responsibility for a child, within the notion that a school can be a home. Finally, arising from both of these topics, a case is made for institutional altruism, going beyond the formal roles assigned to schools and teachers.
Although this is not an essay in teacher education, the implications for that activity are clear. The quality of teachers worldwide is dependent on their having firm roots in reason and morality whilst being able to withstand what seem to be increasingly predatory politicians, interested in uprooting democratic principles for personal gain. Since the 2016 Presidential election in the U.S., it has become a mantra of liberal thought that only the institutions created by the Constitution provide the bulwarks against disruption, depravity and destruction. The school teacher can, to trade on John Bunyan, be ‘Valiant-for-Truth’ and the public schools must be self-conscious guardians of a democratic and civil society, especially as they are targets for zealots and ideologues. They need moral and practical support and protection especially from universities and colleges. Teacher education needs to be robust, brave, with an unquestionable commitment to reason, truth, sophisticated inquiry and moral purpose and practice.

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