

Building Democratic Community: A Radical Approach to Moral Education

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SINCE 1975, I have worked with Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues to develop the Just Community approach to moral education. This approach focuses on building moral community through involving students in democratic decision-making. Although the Just Community approach embodies the highest ideals of our nation, our efforts to disseminate it have met with entrenched resistance. In spite of the approach's demonstrated effectiveness in promoting moral development, building cohesive community, fostering democratic skills, and reducing disciplinary problems, principals and teachers typically regard it as unrealistic. Although schools espouse democracy and community in their mottoes and mission statements, they are not democracies; principals and teachers govern autocratically. Few, if any, formal opportunities are available for students to participate in deciding what matters most to students—school discipline and social life. Although most schools have some form of student government, its function is typically and carefully confined to organizing social events and fund-raisers. Schools beyond the elementary level are not cohesive communities; cliques and

crowds dominate the social landscape. Although most schools pay lip service to building community through sports programs and school assemblies, few establish a genuine sense of solidarity that cuts across sex, race, social class, and friendship group.

Although the character education movement has been growing rapidly in the United States, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the school environment. As I will argue, schools, particularly junior high and high schools, often undermine character education by fostering cultures inimical to the values taught in class. Principals and teachers simply fail to recognize how the culture co-opts their well-intentioned efforts to teach virtue. When we think of schools, we think of the curriculum, methods of teaching, techniques of discipline, and specialized remedial and counseling services. We rarely attend to the culture of the school, except in moments of crisis. Only after shootings in our schools, for example, have we acknowledged the problem of bullying, long a staple of peer culture in American junior high and high schools. Yet in spite of our awareness of the pain that bullying brings about, we have done little or nothing to address bullying at the cultural level. Instead, we have seen a rapid rise in metal detectors, lock-down procedures, zero-tolerance policies, and dress codes. We have speculated about the mysteries of the adolescent psyche. School officials have responded to the symptoms of violence but not to their underlying causes. Our superintendents, principals, teachers, and the wider public have difficulty seeing bullying and breaches of discipline such as cheating and vandalism as based in the school's culture. They perceive such problems in a gestalt that accentuates individual students but not the groups to which they belong. Until we change the culture of schools into democratic communities, these problems are likely to persist and our character education programs to flounder.

Kohlberg's Sociological Turn

Those not familiar with Kohlberg's contributions to moral education may be puzzled by his investment in an approach that places such a strong emphasis on the organization and culture of the school. Kohlberg became famous for his six-stage theory of moral judgment, a theory that grew out of Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental research. Kohlberg's stage theory provides a powerful tool for understanding how children and adolescents think about and resolve moral problems, and his theory has obvious educational implications. For example, if children reason differently from their teachers, then teachers have to tailor their moral instruction to the children's level. Moreover, if Kohlberg and Piaget are correct that children construct their moral reasoning through social interaction, then methods of moral education should treat children as active, not passive, learners. The most direct application of Kohlberg's moral psychology is the dilemma-discussion approach in which leaders encourage students through Socratic questioning to resolve moral dilemmas. Research shows that when used appropriately over an extended period, the dilemma-discussion approach is an effective and reliable way of promoting moral stage development.

When Kohlberg began his research on the moral stages as a doctoral student in the late 1950s, the majority of social scientists equated morality with the norms and values of a particular society. In this view, moral education is reduced to the socialization or internalization of a society's standards. Kohlberg, on the other hand, thought that morality is based on universal principles of justice. For him, moral education meant the cultivation of moral reasoning. Although Kohlberg believed that moral education deserved to be undertaken in school, he questioned the extent to which schools really helped children to develop their thinking. Kohlberg was fond of describing children as natural moral philosophers, but he was unsure whether teachers, accustomed to wielding unquestioned moral authority in the classroom, would be willing to engage in philosophical dialogue with their students. Kohl-

berg became involved personally in moral education only after one of his graduate students, Moshe Blatt, demonstrated that the dilemma-discussion approach produced measurable stage change.

Although Kohlberg came to education as a psychologist focused on individual moral development, his early writings about education reveal a nascent and growing interest in the organization and culture of the school, territory usually explored by sociologists. Reflecting on the implications of his dissertation research, Kohlberg suggests in his first article on education that effective moral education has to address the hierarchical structure of the classroom and school.¹ He finds that the moral reasoning of children from working-class backgrounds does not develop to the higher moral stages as frequently as that of their age peers. Noting that such development seemed to require taking the perspective of those in authority, Kohlberg recommends that schools provide opportunities for students to participate in decision-making.

Several years later in arguably his best essay on moral education, Kohlberg boldly concludes that in order to accomplish the goal of moral development schools must provide a special environment:

The Platonic view that I have been espousing suggests something still revolutionary and frightening to me if not to you, that the schools would be radically different places if they took seriously the teaching of real knowledge of the good.²

Kohlberg describes the ideal school as a “little Republic” in which principles of justice and love are central. Kohlberg’s “little Republic” would be ruled not by an aristocracy of philosopher-teachers, but by a democracy of teachers and students engaged in philosophical deliberation about the good of their community.

Kohlberg’s theorizing took an even more decisive sociological turn

1. L. Kohlberg, “Moral Education in the School,” *School Review* 74 (1966): 1–30.

2. L. Kohlberg, “Education for Justice: A Modern Restatement of the Platonic View,” in N. Sizer and T. Sizer, eds., *Moral Education: Five Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970): 83.

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after a visit to an innovative Israeli Youth Aliyah Kibbutz high school program in 1969. In a little-known chapter with the revealing title “Cognitive Developmental Theory and the Practice of Collective Moral Education,” Kohlberg advances a startling proposal: “Right now, Youth Aliyah Kibbutz youth group practice seems better than anything we conceive from our theory, and it is not revisions in practice, but revisions of the way of thinking about it that I am suggesting.”³ Earlier in his career, Kohlberg had joined Piaget in criticizing the collectivist moral education advocated by the great French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1925–1973).⁴ Kohlberg saw collectivist moral education as a form of authoritarian indoctrination that resulted in conformity. His observations of the functioning of a democratic kibbutz youth group, however, led him to distinguish Durkheim’s collectivism from that practiced in the totalitarian Soviet Union. After his kibbutz visit, Kohlberg entertained the possibility that Durkheim’s collectivist theory could be made compatible with democratic decision-making and that the student peer group could become a powerful resource for promoting development. Yet how this strange hybrid of cognitive developmental psychology and collectivist sociology might serve to guide practice remained a puzzle until Cluster School, the first experimental Just Community school, opened in 1974.

Kohlberg completed his sociological turn after working several years in the Cluster School. As I will illustrate, we learned, often the hard way, that changing the peer culture required much more than simply leading stimulating moral discussions. We had to seize every opportunity to convince students to see themselves as part of a cohesive community and to accept responsibility for each other and for Cluster’s future. We had to help them to believe that Cluster’s welfare depended

3. L. Kohlberg, “Cognitive Developmental Theory and the Practice of Collective Moral Education,” in M. Wolins and M. Gottesman, eds., *Group Care: An Israeli Approach* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1971): 370.

4. E. Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1925/1973).

on their willingness to uphold Cluster's disciplinary policies and to sacrifice themselves.

The Practice of Democracy

Democracy provides the means of communicating the vision of community and transforming that vision into a reality. Democracy also serves as the link between individual and collective development. The most important of the Just Community's democratic institutions was the weekly community meeting in which students and faculty met to discuss community problems and to adopt rules and policies. Decisions in the community meetings were made through direct participatory democracy, with each student and faculty member having an equal vote. Students and faculty prepared for the community meeting by meeting each week in advisory groups of a dozen or so students and one teacher. These meetings allowed everyone to discuss the issues that would come before the entire community; in effect they were dry runs for the larger community meeting. Infractions of rules and conflicts between students, or between students and teachers, were taken up in the discipline committee, which in later Just Community programs has been aptly renamed the fairness committee. This committee, whose membership rotated every few months, consisted mostly of students. Appeals of this committee's decisions went directly to the community meeting.

As we discovered in Cluster and rediscover each time we start a new Just Community program, establishing the institutions of participatory democracy is easy; achieving the ideal of democratic community is not. Living in a representative democracy, we have little experience deliberating in common about the rules and policies that affect our daily lives, and often less experience deliberating about the common good. We live in a time of widespread cynicism about democratic politics, cynicism that reaches down into our schools. We found in Cluster, and continue to find, that it takes almost an entire year for

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faculty and students to trust that the democratic process can work fairly for everyone. That kind of trust comes about only through actual experience. Faculty fears of a tyranny of the student majority and student fears of a sham democracy have, as we shall see, some basis, but they can be addressed.

The early days of Cluster were, by all accounts, at times chaotic. Teachers insisted that the first community meeting be dedicated to planning an innovative afternoon curriculum. They presented students with an impressive array of elective courses only to find that the students were less interested in designing the curriculum than they were testing the extent of their democratic power. One student interrupted the teacher-dominated discussion with a motion to make afternoon classes optional. A second quickly followed, and students asked for an immediate vote. Not surprisingly, the motion carried easily. As the students got up to leave, Kohlberg, noting that their vote was only a straw vote, stopped them.

At about the same time, Kohlberg arranged a field trip for the students to see a movie at Harvard, which was down the street from the high school. At a community meeting to prepare for the trip, Kohlberg explained that smoking would not be permitted in the auditorium where the movie would be shown and he made the trip conditional upon a democratic decision to prohibit smoking. The students readily agreed but when the movie began, students casually lit up their cigarettes. After waiting in vain for the teachers to intervene, Kohlberg stopped the projector and flicked on the lights. He expressed shock and wonder that students would so casually violate their democratically made rule. Kohlberg was less surprised that the students would break the rule than that the faculty failed to intervene. He quickly realized that this experiment in moral education would have to begin with the teachers, who were no more experienced with democratic community than were the students. Teachers tend to think of discipline dichotomously, as being either authoritarian or permissive, and to think of being democratic as being permissive. During the free-school movement of the 1970s, many

teachers idealistically and naively believed that once the oppressive constraints of authoritarian discipline were withdrawn, students would naturally be cooperative and responsible. Teachers were generally reluctant to endorse rules of any type and preferred to establish guidelines and to deal with compliance issues on an informal, individual basis.

We viewed democracy very differently from most of those involved with the alternative school movement at that time. First of all, we insisted that attendance at community meetings be a nonnegotiable requirement for all students and faculty. Making democracy mandatory seemed contradictory, particularly to teachers and students in free schools. On the other hand, we believed that direct participatory democracy was the fundamental principle upon which the school is established. We also thought of democracy as a form of pedagogy. As did John Dewey (1916/1966), we regarded democratic participation as a means as well as an end of education.⁵ We recognized that most high school students are not fully competent to shoulder the responsibilities of democratic participation. On the other hand, we believed that they could best acquire democratic competencies as well as a sense of civic engagement through democratic experience. We therefore adopted an apprenticeship model of democratic education advanced long ago by Horace Mann, the founder of the American public school. Mann called attention to the irony of having authoritarian schools in a democratic nation:

In order that men may be prepared for self-government, their apprenticeship must begin in childhood . . . He who has been a serf until the day before he is twenty-one years of age, cannot be an independent citizen the day after; and it makes no difference whether he has been a serf in Austria or America. As the fitting apprenticeship for despotism consists in being trained for despotism, so the fitting apprenticeship for self-government consists in being trained to self-government.⁶

5. J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916/1966).

6. H. Mann, *The Republic and the School: The Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1845/1957): 58.

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The apprenticeship model has two essential features. First, it is a learn-by-doing approach that gives students regular opportunities to practice democratic decision-making. Second, it is a training approach that provides direction and guidance. Although democracy involves an egalitarian relationship between teachers and students, an apprenticeship is by nature hierarchical. An apprenticeship in democracy may thus appear to be contradictory. Yet the hierarchy of an apprenticeship is primarily established, not through positional authority but through expertise and experience. In a democratic apprenticeship, the teachers' expertise is exercised primarily through their persuasiveness and organizational responsibility in establishing and maintaining democratic institutions.

We may ask, however, whether teachers can be both leaders and equal members of a democratic school. In his classic *The Moral Education of the Child*, Piaget (1932/1965) raises serious problems for such a view.⁷ He postulates that there are two moralities of the child: a morality of constraint of the adult over the child and a morality of cooperation among children. A morality of constraint follows almost inevitably from the hierarchical relationship of adult to child. A morality of cooperation develops out of peer relationships. These moralities operate in diametrically different ways. A morality of constraint is one of subservient compliance to a superior authority—reason has no place in this morality because the child bases respect for authority on the mere fact of the adult's superior power. A morality of cooperation, on the other hand, is one of collaboration among equals—reason is central to this morality because the children must freely establish their own rules and norms. Piaget denounces the monarchical authority that leads teachers to foster mindless conformity in their students. Such an approach, he writes, ignores the facts of child development and fosters rebellion at worst and passivity at the very least.

7. J. Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: Free Press, 1965; original work published in 1932).

We agree with Piaget that adults can and often do get in the way of the development of children's moral judgment. As I noted earlier, Kohlberg's research on moral discussions showed that to be effective, teachers had to use a Socratic questioning approach. Nothing can short-circuit a discussion more quickly than a teacher who answers his or her own question or requires students to guess at the right answer. We believe that teachers have to engage students in serious moral dialogue, which entails careful listening as well as questioning. This means that teachers must set aside their roles as the authority who possesses the truth to assume the role of fellow inquirer. In a democratic school, this means that teachers should act as equal members of the group or, in Piaget's terms, as elder collaborators. When necessary, teachers should also act as facilitators of moral discussion and the democratic process. The apprenticeship model suggests that the teachers' role extends beyond that of facilitator to that of exemplar or leader.

The Teacher's Role

Only after several years of consultation at Cluster did we manage to articulate the complex role that teachers should play in the Just Community democracy. The role entailed maintaining a delicate balance between offering direction and releasing control. Teachers had to encourage students to feel a sense of ownership of the school while challenging them to strive for the ideals of community. At times, teachers had to withhold their own opinions in order to facilitate student discussion; at other times, the teachers had to speak out on behalf of the community, or sometimes on behalf of their own interests.

Kohlberg's thinking about the teacher's role was heavily influenced by his observations of the *madrich*, the adult leader in a kibbutz school. Kohlberg reported that through the *madrich's* skillful but subtle direction, the students formed an unusually cohesive and well-disciplined community. Kohlberg noted, "Underneath the informality of the *madrich* there is a considerable amount of iron, and this iron is based on

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the theory of collective education.”⁸ The *madrich* seldom gave orders or speeches, but he understood and made use of the power of the peer group. There is no clear counterpart to the *madrich* in the American education system. The *madrich* assumed some of the familiar functions of principal, counselor, and homeroom teacher, yet the *madrich*'s major contribution was to work through the democratic process to involve students in building community.

Although we tried to help the Cluster teachers to adopt a role similar to that of the *madrich*, we had little initial success. Junior-high and high-school teachers see themselves primarily as responsible for teaching their subject, for example, history, science, or math. Unless they teach a civics education course, they do not see themselves as responsible for preparing students for democratic citizenship. Moreover, they are generally uncomfortable about their roles as disciplinarians. Most teachers think of discipline as control or management, a necessary but unpleasant way of securing the conditions that allow them to teach. Interviews that my students and I have conducted reveal that they have difficulty even imagining discipline as “the morality of the classroom” (Durkheim, 1925/1973) or discipline as an educational activity.⁹ Before we were able to help the Cluster teachers forge their role in the Just Community approach, we had to persuade them that deliberating about disciplinary problems in a democratic context was worth the time and effort. We had to help them become aware of the value of listening to students rather than simply preaching to them.

I demonstrate the benefits as well as the challenge of envisioning a new disciplinary role for teachers with a simple example taken from a conventional junior high school. The teacher, Ms. Jones, was known as one of the best teachers in the junior high school. She related well to students and was interested in learning more about moral education.

8. See Kohlberg (1971): 358.

9. E. Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1925/1973): 1448.

In the middle of the school year, she discovered that one of her advanced students, Susan, had given her assignment to Joey, who had copied it. She swiftly punished Susan and Joey for cheating by giving them failing grades for the assignment, calling their parents, and excluding them from the monthly good-behavior pizza party. When I became aware of this incident, I thought that it might provide a teachable moment for Ms. Jones to explore the issue of copying assignments with her class and maybe even for her to involve students in making a rule prohibiting such collaboration as well as more serious kinds of cheating. I suggested to Ms. Jones that the students who cheated may not have felt that what they had done was really wrong, and recommended that she hold a class discussion about such copying to ascertain what her students thought. If her students did not think that it was wrong, then she might have to reconsider her punitive response and, at the very least, lead a moral discussion on cheating.

Ms. Jones agreed to the discussion although she expressed skepticism about its necessity. The following day she asked the class, "Who here believes that lending your class assignment to another student isn't cheating?" The students snickered but not a hand went up. Ms. Jones concluded by reminding her students that the rules she had distributed in writing at the beginning of the school year clearly forbade such cheating, and she expected no more incidents. After class dismissal, another student was overheard asking Susan to let her copy her homework over the lunch period.

This example illustrates the futility of an authoritarian approach to discipline. Ms. Jones established and enforced the classroom rules without involving the students. However, she did not believe that she was simply asserting her authority as a teacher or that she was demanding obedience to an arbitrary or irrational rule. The purpose of homework, mastery of the material, is undermined by copying someone else's answers. Copying, moreover, is dishonest. Students surely know or at least can readily recognize the point that this is true. Would explaining the educational benefits of doing one's own work or the importance of

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honesty have made any difference in Susan's or anyone else's behavior? In my view, the problem was not a matter of student ignorance or ill will but a problem of the peer culture. Students did not think about copying in moral terms. In fact, the students had developed a norm among themselves in which copying was understood as helping. In order to change the peer culture, Ms. Jones would first have had to invite her students to share their views on the matter. What would students have replied if Ms. Jones had asked them what they thought about copying? When I later asked Susan why she cheated, she objected, "Cheating? I thought that I was helping, that I was being a Mother Teresa." If Susan had participated in a genuine moral discussion with her peers, she would likely have defended her action as being harmless at worst (Joey usually did his own work) and altruistic at best (not only was she helping a friend who had fallen behind but also all the students in the advanced group who had to wait for him to finish). Ms. Jones would have been in a good position to suggest to Susan and her peers that a better way of helping Joey may have been to encourage him to finish the work on his own. Ms. Jones could also have discussed the matters of honesty and the importance of trust in the classroom. Eventually Ms. Jones could have asked the class to come up with a rule for assignments to express the values of working on one's own, honesty, and trust.

In sketching out how Ms. Jones could have acted, I wish not to blame her. She is to be commended for the moral seriousness with which she responded to the incident in her class. Many teachers might have looked the other way or failed to realize that moral issues were at stake. Ms. Jones's response was, nevertheless, ineffectual—possibly even counterproductive. She could have acted differently with a far greater probability of success, but unfortunately could not perceive another way of acting. Teachers are neither prepared for nor expected to lead moral discussions about classroom discipline, let alone to organize their classrooms to provide an apprenticeship in democracy. Teachers are not trained to play the role of the *madrich* in mobilizing students to build

a better community to attend to the peer culture. Ms. Jones punished Susan and Joey, assuming that this would deter them and others in the future. The punishment, however, appeared to deter no one except Susan, who refused to lend her homework the next time she was asked. When I later asked her why she did not lend her homework, she stated simply that she did not want to get in trouble. She confided that she felt angry and betrayed, and that her friends supported her. It appears that the deterrent approach not only failed to influence Susan's moral reasoning but also alienated Susan and her peers from the teacher, and to some extent from the school itself.

Analyzing the effectiveness of the conventional classroom management approach to discipline from the standpoint of moral education will, I believe, lead to the exploration of alternatives such as the Just Community approach, which address student culture as well as moral reasoning. We need to be able to bridge the culture gap, identified long ago by Willard Waller, who depicted teachers and their students as living two different, almost impenetrable social worlds.¹⁰ The students, he found, tend to bond together in strong primary groups, which teachers try to control from the outside, as it were, through extrinsic rewards and punishments. As I have illustrated, the mechanisms of extrinsic control only further alienate the student culture. In order to break down the barriers between teachers and students, teachers need to appeal to the student culture from the inside. This is what the Just Community approach tries to do by asking teachers to share power as well as responsibility in enabling students to build a cohesive moral community.

The teacher's role in the Just Community encompasses more than that of facilitator and elder collaborator—teachers must be willing to guide and to lead. As was evident from the earliest Cluster community meetings, teachers need to impress upon students the need for careful deliberation before coming to a decision. Teachers may also be called upon to give direction to discussions by speaking out on behalf of the

10. W. Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1932).

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ideals of the community. Kohlberg played this role in the early days of Cluster, and we wanted faculty to assume it as soon as possible; we conceived this role as that of advocate. In formalizing it, we were all too aware that teachers could easily abuse it. On the other hand, we recognized that the Cluster democracy would flounder without Kohlberg and the teachers consistently appealing to the two pillars of the Just Community approach: democracy and community. These pillars are not just descriptive aspects of an institutional reality, they are normative ideals. Cluster had to become a democracy by developing depth of participation, and a community by developing bonds of caring, trust, and responsibility.

Building Community through Collective Norms

I conclude this chapter by discussing our understanding of community and how we tried to build it through establishing what we called collective norms. We defined community as a group in which members value their common life for its own sake, distinguishing community from an association in which relationships among the members are valued instrumentally. The kind of community that we endeavored to develop through the Just Community approach was one characterized by shared expectations for a high degree of solidarity, care, trust, and participation in group activities. These expectations did not arise spontaneously but had to be carefully cultivated over time.

We discovered early that the opportunity to vote on rules was insufficient to change student behavior. Students were accustomed to having rules against disrupting class, fighting, stealing, and skipping class; but these rules were enforced by the teachers through personal charisma or threat. We wanted to get the student peer group behind the rule. This meant that students would have to view the rules as expressing the shared expectations of the community. How could one lead students to have enough of a sense of ownership of the school so that they cared about the welfare of the community as a whole? Making

rules democratically after considerable discussion helped enormously. Over time, students felt a sense of ownership of the school and increasingly accepted responsibility for resolving disciplinary problems, yet the students typically tried to address problems extrinsically through the threat of punishment rather than intrinsically through appealing to each other's commitment to the community's core values.

We first used the term "collective norm" to describe the shared expectations that we were trying to engender through community meeting discussions when we compared transcripts from two community meetings focused on the issue of stealing (see Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg).¹¹ The first meeting took place during Cluster's first year and resulted in a rule prohibiting stealing; the second, the following year, resulted in a decision that everyone should chip in to reimburse a theft victim in the school. We believed that a sense of community had clearly developed from the first to the second year. We were hard-pressed, however, to describe the change in the community's culture to distinguish it from the stage change simultaneously occurring in the individual student's moral reasoning.

When stealing first occurred in Cluster, the students were nonchalant. "School isn't a place for trusting stuff, even at Cluster. Community or not, if you want something, you'll take it. It [stealing] goes to show you can't be too friendly." When Kohlberg attempted to arouse a feeling of moral indignation about the lack of trust and community, a student shot back, "Just because a few things were stolen, you don't have to cry about it." Many students seemed to think that stealing was wrong simply because it was a violation of one's concrete right of ownership (what Kohlberg scored as Stage 2 reasoning). Others voiced the more advanced insight that stealing was a violation of interpersonal trust (Stage 3): "I know lots of people who steal . . . and you really feel bad about that." Even those students conceded that there was not much that could

11. F. C. Power, A. Higgins, and L. Kohlberg, *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

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be done about stealing besides establishing a punishment that might deter potential thieves. By the following year, the focus of the discussion had shifted radically. Many more students spoke up than in the previous year, and the majority seemed to be invested in Kohlberg's vision of community.

Phyllis: It is everyone's fault that she don't have no money. It was stolen because people don't care about the community. [They think] they are all individuals and don't have to be included in the community. Everybody should care that she got her money stolen [and therefore] we [those students in Phyllis's advisory group] decided to give her money back to her.

Bob: That somebody stole the money is pretty bad, but to me, that I have to pay because she lost her money is like someone robbing a bank and the bank owner comes to my door and asks me to pay a couple of bucks because they lost their money. That's crazy!

Albert: What's your definition of community?

Bob: My definition of community is that people can help one another right there. But I didn't say nothing about giving money out.

Albert: The money was lost or stolen or whatever and it's not really to return the money, it is to help someone in the community altogether. I think it would be the first really community thing that we have ever done, really. It doesn't concern the money, it concerns community action.

Peggy: I think that if Bob feels so strongly about [giving] his fifteen cents to Monica that he shouldn't belong in this community. I am sure that if it was his money he would feel the other way around. He wouldn't want nine dollars taken from him, he would be crying.¹²

Kohlberg and I were especially intrigued with Phyllis's comments because, in addition to expressing her own point of view, she seemed to be speaking on behalf of the Cluster community. According to Kohlberg's stage theory, Phyllis saw the problem of stealing as more than a concrete loss of property (Stage 2), but as a lack of interpersonal caring

12. Ibid., 113–114.

(Stage 3). Albert and Peggy clearly agreed with Phyllis for similar, Stage-3 reasons. Kohlberg and I found that on the whole, there were far more instances of Stage-3 reasoning in this second meeting than in the first, suggesting that the modal stage of the group may have developed from Stage 2 to Stage 3. Yet this depiction of the change between the two years failed to capture the way in which Phyllis, Albert, and Peggy appeared to be speaking as representatives of the Cluster community and not just for themselves as individuals. Phyllis says, “Everybody should care that she got her money stolen” and earlier that the theft was “everyone’s fault.” Phyllis is clearly voicing more than her personal opinion about stealing. She is expressing a norm that she believes binds her fellow students not only as individuals but as members of the community.

Phyllis, moreover, is not merely proposing that the community adopt norms of trust and caring as Kohlberg did in the previous year. Phyllis assumes that the community has accepted these norms and expresses disappointment that some members have not lived up to them. Her statements as well as Albert’s and Peggy’s suggest that the culture of Cluster had changed dramatically. Over the course of a year, Cluster appeared to have developed from a collection of individuals with very low aspirations for their common life to a community in which members are expected to care for and trust one another.

How can we be certain that Phyllis and others represented the wider group? There were students like Bob in Cluster, who did not understand or did not agree with the concept of community that Phyllis, Albert, and Peggy advanced. The best that we could hope for was that increasing numbers of students would share a vision of Cluster and ask each other to begin to realize that vision. Each time a class graduated and a new class joined the school, that vision would have to be communicated and the group’s norms renegotiated. Looking over that second meeting, we were encouraged that most of the students who spoke sided with Phyllis, Albert, and Peggy, and that the vast majority of the community voted in favor of Phyllis’s motion for restitution. Interviews with students

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that year confirmed that, indeed, Phyllis had spoken for the majority of the students. A consensus was emerging about what membership in the Cluster community entailed.

Through the process of identifying the development of collective norms, we came to understand more clearly what the Just Community approach demands and why it is so counter-cultural. If we really want schools to become communities characterized by trust, caring, and shared responsibility, teachers and students must engage in serious moral dialogue about their common life. They have to use the democratic process as a means of communicating a vision and establishing shared expectations. In making and enforcing rules, they need to ask themselves whether their decisions reflect a commitment to foster the welfare and solidarity of the community or whether their decisions reflect their own interests or that of a subgroup.

Conclusion

As I illustrated in the example of Susan's cheating, teachers do not habitually deliberate about disciplinary and school life issues with students, nor build community, by asking students to make sacrifices for worthy ideals. Ironically, Bob's depiction of the school as a bank may well be accurate for conventional schools. We join banks for instrumental, self-serving purposes; banks cannot ask us to be responsible for each other's or the bank's welfare. The more schools resemble banks, the less effective they are in fostering moral development. Our experience with the Just Community approach in Cluster and in subsequent projects suggests that schools can buck the culture; they do not have to be like banks.

Some have asked whether the Just Community programs have more than a temporary, context-specific influence on their students. Why focus on developing collective norms within a particular school? What happens when students leave the community? I maintain that the experience of democratically participating in moral community fosters

general confidence in the democratic process and commitment to the common good. There is now some quantitative evidence to support me. Grady found that ten years after their graduation, Cluster alumnae and alumni were more likely than their peers to have an interest in politics and national affairs; to have voted in local elections; to have a concern for local government decisions; and to have worked with others in a community to solve community problems.¹³

There is now an unprecedented commitment at the federal, state, and local levels to promote character education in our nation's schools. As programs proliferate, we should be wary of programs that proclaim the virtues in abstract and superficial ways but do not touch students' hearts or minds. We should be sensitive to the fact that the values that we espouse in such programs are often not the values that are reflected in the institutional and cultural life of the school. We should be concerned that although we live in a democratic society, our schools are not democratic. If the Just Community approach seems radical today, it is because our schools are not the places that they should be and we have not prepared our teachers and our principals as we should. The Just Community approach is radical in the sense that it is rooted in the principles of democracy and community upon which our nation stands. We should, like Kohlberg, ask our schools to become "little republics," challenging our students to commit themselves to a higher good and in so doing fostering the development of moral responsibility and civic engagement.

13. E. A. Grady, "After Cluster School: A Study of the Impact in Adulthood of a Moral Education Intervention Project." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1994.