

The Atlantic

Students' Broken Moral Compasses

The pressures of national academic standards have pushed character education out of the classroom.



David Moir / Reuters

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A few months ago, I presented the following scenario to my junior English students: Your boyfriend or girlfriend has committed a felony, during which other people were badly harmed. Should you or should you not turn him or her into the police?

The class immediately erupted with commentary. It was obvious, they said, that loyalty was paramount—not a single student said they'd “snitch.” They were unequivocally unconcerned about who was harmed in this hypothetical scenario. This troubled me.

This discussion was part of an introduction to an essay assignment about whether Americans should pay more for ethically produced food. We continued discussing other dilemmas, and the kids were more engaged than they'd been in weeks, grappling with big questions about values, character, and right versus wrong as I attempted to expand their thinking about who and what is affected—and why it matters—by their caloric choices.

I was satisfied that students were clearly thinking about tough issues, but unsettled by their lack of experience considering their own values. “Do you think you should discuss morality and ethics more often in school?” I asked the class. The vast majority of heads nodded in agreement. Engaging in this type of discourse, it seemed, was a mostly foreign concept for the kids.

Widespread adoption of the Common Core standards—despite resistance by some states—arguably continues the legacy of the No Child Left Behind Act. The 2002 law **charged** all public schools to achieve 100 percent proficiency in reading and math by 2014, meaning that all students were expected to be on grade level. This unrealistic target forced schools to track and measure the academic achievement of all students, a goal lauded by most, but one that ultimately elevated standardized testing and severely narrowed curricula. Quantifying academic gains remains at the forefront of school-improvement efforts to the detriment of other worthwhile purposes of schooling.

As my students seemed to crave more meaningful discussions and instruction relating to character, morality, and ethics, it struck me how invisible these issues have become in many schools. By omission, are U.S. schools teaching their students that character, morality, and ethics aren't important in becoming productive, successful citizens?

For many American students who have attended a public school at some point since 2002, standardized-test preparation and narrowly defined academic success has been the unstated, but de facto, purpose of their schooling experience. And while school mission statements often reveal a goal of preparing students for a mix of lifelong success, citizenship, college, and careers, the reality is that addressing content standards and test preparation continues to dominate countless schools' operations and focus.

In 2014, [an annual end-of-year kindergarten show](#) in New York was canceled so students could focus on college-and-career readiness. [Test-prep rallies](#) have become increasingly commonplace, especially at the elementary level. And according to a [2015 Council of the Great City Schools study](#), eighth-graders spend an average of 25.3 hours a year taking standardized tests. In Kentucky, where I teach, high schools are under pressure to produce students who are ready for college, defined as simply reaching benchmark scores in reading, English, and math on the ACT.

Talking with my students about ethics and gauging their response served as a wakeup call for me to consider my own role as an educator and just how low character development, ethics, and helping students develop a moral identity have fallen with regard to debate over what schools should teach. The founders of this country, [Jessica Lahey wrote in *The Atlantic*](#), would “likely be horrified by the loss of this goal, as they all cite character education as the way to create an educated and virtuous citizenry.” According to Gallup polling, Lahey added, 90 percent of adults support the teaching in public schools of honesty, acceptance of others, and moral courage, among other character traits. What adults hope occurs in schools, however, is in sharp contrast to observations provided by teens themselves.

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The [2012 Josephson Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth](#) reveals a

pressing need to integrate elements of character education into the country's public-school curriculums. According to the study, 57 percent of teens stated that successful people do what they have to do to win, even if it involves cheating. Twenty-four percent believe it is okay to threaten or hit someone when angry. Thirty-one percent believe physical violence is a big problem in their schools. Fifty-two percent reported cheating at least once on an exam. Forty-nine percent of students reported being bullied or harassed in a manner that seriously upset them.

In the recently released *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*, Michelle Borba claims narcissism is on the rise, especially in the Western world, as more teens concur with the statement: "I am an extraordinary person." If empathy is crucial to developing a moral identity, then this trend should be troubling to parents and educators who hope that students foster the ability to see the world through others's eyes.

My own observations support the data. I'm frequently unnerved by the behaviors I see in classrooms and hallways every day, from physical and verbal bullying, to stereotyping, to students leaving trash strewn all over the outdoor cafeteria courtyard.

"Teaching character education in schools is actually unavoidable ... [E]verything the school chooses to do or not do in terms of curriculum choices" influences the culture of a school and the character of its students, Steve Ellenwood, the director of Boston University's [Center for Character and Social Responsibility \(CCSR\)](#), wrote in an email. His words resonated with me. During my 12 years in education, I can't recall a single meeting in which the discussion of student character and ethics was elevated to anything close to the level of importance of academics within school curricula.

Groups like the CCSR and the Josephson Institute of Ethics' [Character Counts!](#) initiative strive to enhance existing school programs and curricula to address these issues, proof that efforts do exist to transform schools into places where character education is elevated within traditional curricula. But Ellenwood laments that many educators "blithely accept that schools must be value-neutral," adding that

there is legal precedent for teaching about religions (and not imposing any set of beliefs), character, and ethics. And divisive national politics have left many educators with difficult choices about addressing certain issues, [especially those who teach immigrant students](#) who are actively afraid of their fates if Donald Trump wins the election.

A reluctance to teach about religions and value systems is coinciding with a steady decline of teen involvement in formal religious activity over the past 50 years, [according to research led by San Diego State Professor Jean Twenge](#). And while attending church is only one way young people may begin to establish a moral identity, schools don't seem to be picking up the slack. There's undoubtedly a fear about what specific ethical beliefs and character traits schools might teach, but one answer might be to expose students to tough issues in the context of academic work—not imposing values, but simply exploring them.

At a recent convening of 15 teacher-leaders from around the country at the [Center for Teaching Quality](#) in Carrboro, North Carolina, I spoke to some colleagues about the balance between teaching academic content and striving to develop students' moral identities. Leticia Skae-Jackson, an English teacher in Nashville, Tennessee, and Nick Tutolo, a math teacher in Pittsburgh, both commented that many teachers are overwhelmed by the pressure and time demands in covering academic standards. Focusing on character and ethics, they said, is seen as an additional demand.

"We're sacrificing the humanity of students for potential academic and intellectual gain."

Nonetheless, Tutolo engages his math students at the beginning of the school year by focusing on questions of what it means to be a conscientious person and citizen while also considering how his class could address community needs. His seventh-grade class focused on the issue of food deserts in Pittsburgh and began a campaign to build hydroponic window farms. While learning about ratios and

scaling—skills outlined in the Common Core math standards—students began working to design and distribute the contraptions to residents in need, a project that will continue this fall as Tutolo “loops” up to teach eighth grade.

William Anderson, a high-school teacher in Denver, takes a similar approach to Tutolo, but told me that “most teachers haven’t been trained to design instruction that blends academic content with an exploration of character and ethics.” He emphasized that schools should promote this approach to develop well-rounded students. Addressing academic skills and challenging students to consider ethics and character should not, he argued, be mutually exclusive.

When I reflect upon my own education, two classes stand out with regard to finding the balance between imparting academic skills and developing my own moral identity. My high-school biology teacher Phil Browne challenged us to think about the consequences of our consumer choices and individual actions as they related to ecosystems and the environment in a way that challenged us to think about ourselves as ethical actors.

A couple years later, I signed up for a freshman seminar in college titled “Education and Social Inequality” at Middlebury College in Vermont. I remember being moved by Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* and his moral outrage at dilapidated, underfunded, and understaffed schools in impoverished areas; early on in the course, I struggled to articulate my thoughts during essay assignments. My professor, Peggy Nelson, would sit quietly during seminars, watching us squirm in our seats while we grappled with big ideas such as personal responsibility, systemic injustice, and racism.

Entering my 13th year in the classroom this fall, I hope to continue striving to capture the dynamic that Browne, Nelson, Tutolo, Skae-Jackson, Anderson, and other skilled educators have achieved by blending academic instruction with the essential charge of developing students as people. It’s time for critical reflection about values our schools transmit to children by omission in our curriculum of the essential human challenges of character development, morality, and ethics. Far too often, “we’re sacrificing the humanity of students for potential academic and

intellectual gain,” Anderson said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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