Moral Teachers, Moral Students

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The media often reports accounts of students who have conducted themselves in an immoral fashion, demonstrating greed, delinquency, or disrespect to a public audience. As a result of this reported increase in student immorality, schools have focused on character education programs that include aspects of community service, building good habits, and developing students’ capacity for moral reasoning. Dr. Weissbourd, however, argues that the ethical judgment of students depends not on these programs, but instead primarily on the “maturity and ethical capacities of the adults with whom they interact.”

The author addresses the qualities of teachers who make a difference in student moral development, misconceptions of adults’ moral development, and steps towards effective moral education. In addressing these three key concepts, the author notes four ways in which educators can influence the moral development of students, moving beyond the simple act of being a good role model. Appreciating student perspectives, admitting to and learning from moral errors, maintaining moral idealism, and acting in a generous fashion are ways in which educators can harness the sensitivity that students often have towards the actions and verbalizations of educators.

Teachers who make a difference in the ethical judgment of students are effective at reversing students’ ethical downward spirals, as they consciously try to take the perspective of the students whom they find most challenging. Additionally, communicating high moral expectations, providing regular opportunities for listening and student accomplishment, and willingly evaluating their own moral errors as a model for students assists in the fostering of the moral development of students. Without citing specific data, the author notes that too few teachers “possess” or “express” these qualities, limiting the amount that teachers reach out to students and embodying a sense of lost idealism.

Noting a “steady drizzle of helplessness and hopelessness that can wear teachers down,” the article continues by focusing on the ethical challenges that educators most overcome themselves before assisting students in the quest for moral soundness. Many teachers feel as if they can no longer make a difference in the lives of students. This is evident in their daily practices as disillusioned teachers often become commanding in their interactions with people, govern their behavior by their own moods in lieu of the needs of others, and by taking the path of least resistance and least effort. Additionally, the most notable obstacle is the misconception that they (teachers) are no longer engaged in moral growth. While research notes that moral growth continues to change as individuals reach the very latest stages of life, many adults believe that moral growth is set by late childhood.

In addressing a move toward effective moral education, the author focuses on two main causes of disillusionment and hopelessness in educators: isolation and the strain of dealing with student behavior issues. In support of teachers, many school systems have implemented professional development programs targeted at providing all teachers with more effective tools and techniques for handling student behavior. Ultimately, the goal is to address the moral judgment and helplessness feelings of teachers by better handling student behavior. Finally, the article notes the increased use of mentoring programs as an effective tool against teacher isolation. Mentoring programs allow educators to respond to teachers who may be experiencing disillusionment. Additionally, mentoring programs foster reflective judgment, a tool for assessing personal goals, skills, and beliefs. As a result, reflection on daily practice is helpful in developing teachers’ ethical awareness.

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