

**CURRENT APPROACHES TO MORAL EDUCATION IN THE STATE OF
OKLAHOMA**

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Abstract: In this presentation, we will see what school-based approaches to moral education are operated in Oklahoma, a state in south central US. In order to obtain the relevant data, the researcher designed a qualitative interview with teachers and other educational practitioners. As a result, various ideas and episodes, which are insightful and/or unique, emerged from the participants' responses, and the researcher classified them under two large groups: (1) forms of moral education; and, (2) challenges. Selected transcripts will show distinctive characteristics of Oklahoma moral education.

Keywords: Moral education, Oklahoma, interview.

This paper is part of a larger comparative study on moral education in Korea and the United States (hereafter, US), focusing on the nature of moral formation and conceptualization of shame. In this presentation, partially, we will see what school-based approaches to moral education are operated in Oklahoma, a state in south central US. In order to obtain the relevant data, the researcher designed a qualitative interview with teachers and other educational practitioners, which was permitted by the University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (OU IRB #4879). The subject of recruitment was based on the experience of teachers at K-12 schools in Oklahoma City Metro Area, and there were no specific exclusion criteria for selection. The actual interviews lasted for three months, from November 2014 to February 2015. The total number of participants was eight, and their demographic information was collected for general reporting purposes. Each interview was recorded with the consent of the participant, and the recordings were transcribed literally. Participants were addressed by a pseudonym in the interview transcripts.

Initially, a set of open-ended questions were formulated based on the following themes: school environment concerning moral education; participant's personal view on teaching moral values; and participant's real school-life experiences regarding moral issues.

Upon meeting with the participants, however, the proposed themes and questions served simply as guidelines to discover their perceptions and experiences that are pertinent to moral education. Various ideas and episodes, which are insightful and/or unique, emerged from the participants' responses, and the researcher classified them under two large groups: (1) forms of moral education; and, (2) challenges. Selected transcripts will show distinctive characteristics of Oklahoma moral education. As the occasion demands, the researcher inserted words enclosed in square brackets only to help clarify the meaning of the participants' comments in the quoted sections. The interview questions and background information of interview participants are shown in Table 1 through Table 3.

Table 1: *Interview Questions by Theme*

<u>Theme 1: school environment</u> Can you explain your current school environment and culture to moral or character education?
<u>Theme 2: participant's personal view</u> What do you think about the statement, 'moral values should be taught in schools?' Where do you think moral values come from? What is your opinion about the claim, 'teaching morality is the responsibility of teachers?' Do you see yourself as a moral educator?
<u>Theme 3: participant's real school-life experiences</u> What kind of subject matters or topics do you consider relate to moral education? Have you had any memorable teaching experience regarding moral issues? What would be the sources of a moral motivation for students?

Table 2: *Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Religion	Highest level of education
Amy	43	Female	Caucasian	No	Bachelor
Anne	32	Female	Caucasian/Italian	Catholic	Masters
Richard	39	Male	Caucasian	Methodist	Masters
Rebecca	36	Female	White/Jewish	Jewish	Masters
Chris	31	Female	White/Native American	Christian	Masters
Frank	33	Male	Caucasian	Presbyterian	Masters
Cassidy	48	Female	Caucasian/Non-Hispanic	Southern Baptist	Masters
Mary	37	Female	Caucasian	Secular	Masters

Table 3: *Professional background*

Pseudonym	Occupation	Years of teaching	Places of teaching	Subjects taught
Amy	Teacher	18	Public & Alternative school	All
Anne	Professor	9	Public & Private school	All
Richard	Doctoral student	13	Public & Private school	Humanities
Rebecca	Teacher	4	Public school	Social studies & Humanities
Chris	Teacher	1 ½	Public school	Social studies & STEM
Frank	Administrator	5	Public school	Social studies & Special ed
Cassidy	Teacher	21	Charter & Public school	All
Mary	Assistant principal	11	Public & Private school	All

Forms of Moral Education

The US has not fully developed a form of class instruction as a separate curricular entity for public moral education, so moral education is normally understood to cut across all courses. As Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) figured out, this is an aspect of the current situation in the US classrooms where there is relatively little “formal moral instruction as a recurrent and identifiable piece of curriculum” (p. 4). It was expected that the situation is not much different in Oklahoma; however, the conversations with more than half of the participants confirmed that there is some special awareness and engagement in promoting moral education. Those moral education practices fall into three main groups as listed below.

Comprehensive Dimension of Moral Education

It was reaffirmed that the US moral education typically is not incorporated into a specific subject; rather, it is linked to all areas of school life. Ethical training on anti-bullying, lectures on anti-drug by motivational speakers in school assemblies, and counseling programs are common examples of what public schools in the US do for moral education in its broader sense. To be more specific, a variety of school affairs/activities embody moral education, deliberately or not. As Cassidy said:

[Moral values] is kind of integrated within everything that you do. It is not so much a separate lesson but you have your classroom rules, you have your classroom procedures, you have your classroom environment and all those things kind of lend itself to how you treat other people.

In the same vein, Frank stated:

All teachers are teaching morality at some level because they are teaching people how to be with other people and using a lot of statements like you should do this or you should do that so they are kind of teaching morality maybe just not on purpose or just realizing it.

This comment resonates with the Sizers’ closing remark that “The students watch us, all the time. We must honestly ponder what they see, and what we want them to learn from it” (Sizer & Sizer, 2000, p. 120). Along these lines, Rebecca argued that all teachings include moral aspects:

I don’t really understand if you can teach without being a moral educator. I don’t know what that would look like I can’t remember any teachers I have ever had that were not also moral trainers at the same time. Just to me it is one of the same. It is not something that I can just be one or the other.

These responses not only correspond to an integrated approach but also mirror a well-known principle that all aspects of education give opportunities for character development, at least in the US context. This is rooted in Dewey's idea that moral education is no different from non-moral education (*DE*, 358-60). Anything between teachers and students is moral in nature because morals might be 'caught and not taught,' as the saying goes.

Moral Instruction in the Classroom

A teacher can provide students with 'self-enlarging' experiences that are morally relevant by using the given content of textbooks facilitating discussion with current issues. In fact, some deliberate attempts at encouraging moral discourse were affirmed by several participants. For one thing, moral instruction could be done with part of the regular curriculum: i.e. this is an integrated approach in which moral education is linked to other subjects and curricular areas. It is widely acknowledged that literature arts and social studies classes often address contents that are moral in tone or morally controversial.

Frank shared his teaching experience when he taught American studies:

They like figured out what a party was and what different political parties believed...we talked more about like generally what society should look like or whether or not the government should be involved in people's personal lives those ones like you know a portion on sexuality or something like that.

American studies, a 12th grade social studies class covering politics and economics, seems to be characteristically labeled as citizenship education rather than moral education. Nonetheless, as Frank illustrated above, it is often involved in moral education in that a conflict of opinions arises over the matter of which values deserve priority. In addition, moral issues come up in language arts as well as in all the social studies because of the reading material. The following from Richard's previous advanced placement classes would describe this point well, that moral education could be intertwined with some literature:

We would read *Les Miserables*. And we would get into rich discussion of the difference between justice and mercy. Because the two main characters of the book, police inspector Javert and a former convict Jean Valjean...both embody deeply held moral positions. And they are both right. That was what I wrestled with students... We got into some amazing discussions on what's higher than the law? Because that's what Javert keeps saying over and over that there's nothing higher than the law.

Richard recalled that this "brilliant discussion" was useful to discuss conflicting values, and he continued to share another story:

We read the *Paradise Lost*, which was John Milton's huge epic of the fall of Satan and the fall of men... So it's a very religious text... We had a stoutly devout fundamental evangelical kid...and we have a Muslim kid, a Jewish kid, and an atheist kid... So you would have some really heated conversation. And I would always have to say you can always attack any idea, but you cannot attack a person. You cannot say you're wrong... That was probably the greatest skill I got out of the class was learning how to disagree with somebody.

The transcript above clarifies the difference between edifying students by religious doctrine and treating religious text as educational content. In the context of public school, putting one's personal view about religious belief on the table is not allowed, but it does not necessarily mean that the topic of religion is entirely banned. Because how one teaches is as important as what one teaches, evading tricky issues may result in a superficial approach in education. As Kunzman indicated, a question of fundamental importance is "how do we help students engage thoughtfully with ethical disagreement, even when religion is involved?" (2006, p. 2).

In addition to the integrated approach to moral education we have seen, as Chris remarked, homeroom class could be used for addressing current topics as well as building a sense of community.

We do activities in our morning meetings before each class... We typically will come together and then discuss a current event or something going on in the world around us and share our feelings about that...we can see one another's perspectives and that to me helps to build that culture and that community.

Moreover, Chris illustrated her classroom as a good place to discuss about "race and cultural variations" in that her students are diverse:

When we discussed Thanksgiving there were kids that came to school talking about turkey and dressing but then there were kids that came to school talking about their mom's enchiladas that they had for Thanksgiving dinner so even discussions of why didn't you have turkey and dressing because that is the American thing to do um the race was definitely ethnicity was brought into that discussion.

This seems like a familiar scene in multicultural societies; so different holidays and occasions based on different traditions must be dealt with, in order to develop the ability for students to respect other cultures.

Whether a 'well-intended' educational lesson is part of the school subject or not, it is obvious that we encounter various moments that are moral in content and purpose, so moral instructions happen more frequently than we expect.

School wide Character Education Programs

The findings from the interviews revealed there are several programs regarding moral education at school levels. Interestingly, the participants who introduced some relevant school wide programs were all concerned with primary education. Amy expressed her positive opinion of the autism integrated care program at her school:

Our autistic children are integrated into regular classrooms so we want all of our kids to recognize that...there's nothing wrong with them or bad just because are autistic... So I think our kids are very aware of that and they are very helpful to other kids because they see autistic kids a lot.

Amy's school adopts the method of incorporating autistic children into a traditional classroom. This is more than just a medical treatment only for autism; it is also for unimpaired children in that such an environment helps them to cultivate a sense of mutual cooperation. In addition, Amy explained that her school gives a lesson called Second Step, which is "a different kit for each grade level" designed for character building, moral education, and social skills.

Meanwhile, Anne and Chris spoke about a character education program called Great Expectations, which focuses on professional development in teacher training throughout Oklahoma. Anne stated, "It was a recommended program, and I really liked it because it sort of teaches concepts of connections and relationships." Chris provided more information about the Great Expectations:

It seems at my school that they do care about moral education...we have had all of the Great Expectations model throughout the school... So there are 8 expectations just about how you treat one another and you know we will value one another's unique and special individuals and then there are life principles that all students in our school are taught about.

According to Chris, the researcher discovered that within Oklahoma City schools, teachers receive Great Expectations training through the Oklahoma City Public School system and that it is highly recommended in elementary schools.

From the conversations with Mary, another character education program called Cloud9World emerged:

There are 24 words and about 36 weeks...Like right now one of the words is 'love' so we are doing that right now because it is Valentine's Day and then we do it school wide so we enter the word... we purchased it [Cloud9World] and there is a

book for every word and every word has like a mascot like an animal that goes with it.

The Cloud9World program utilizes visual displays with moral content, so students can experience the virtues that are essential for positive development.

Given that the goal of Great Expectations is in “changing the teacher’s dialogue with students” to create a respectful climate and that Cloud9Word is designed for positive reinforcement in school daily life, it can be easily shown that the implementation of both programs is cross-curricular, permeating the entire curriculum. It is surprising that some schools in Oklahoma conduct such explicit moral lessons with specific programs. This suggests that Oklahoma schools increasingly embrace character education.

Challenges

In the previous section, we have traced the vestiges of moral pedagogy that are currently run in Oklahoma schools. Although different positive sources for moral education were discovered, there is still something left to be desired. Some of the challenges Oklahoma education is facing are beyond the bounds of schooling; some are subtly widespread due to cultural expectations.

External Limitations

Interestingly, what participants, who are currently working or previously worked at secondary school level, said about the true picture of moral education in Oklahoma sounds very different. They indicated a lack of in-depth discussion and organized effort to improve moral education in Oklahoma schooling. It is necessary to consider Oklahoma’s distinct characteristics in which religious and political influence is never negligible, given that the Christian population including Protestant and Catholic, makes up about 79% and that Oklahoma is categorized as politically conservative.

Based on Frank’s remark that “I think in Oklahoma people just assume that everyone is Christian and goes to a big church and so if any of that [moral value] was taught it was maybe an informal conversation or discussion,” one inference we might draw is that moral schooling is not encouraged in Oklahoma because lots of Oklahomans consider school as an unsuitable place to talk about moral values officially.

In the meantime, Cassidy, who believes moral values “in the middle of the Bible belt” come from religious upbringing and the political system, expressed her concern about religious/political influences over moral education. She stated that she has tried to “avoid

some of the political dogma in the intensely religious aspects” which relate to “patriarchy and white males being superior.” She described how the contents in science class are often associated with the issues of religion and politics:

A lot of kids bring in what they have learned from their Sunday school lessons...there is a lot of biology... Some students have religious beliefs...so it is kind of a fine line between giving them factual information without getting the parents upset... Within the State of Oklahoma we had adopted the common core and then we had axed the common core...one of the main things when I listen to our state legislatures when they complain about the science objectives...they don't like the words 'climate change.' They definitely don't like the word 'evolution'...they just don't want in the curriculum and these are decisions being made by legislatures who really don't have a science background in anything.

Such phenomena represent external conditions Oklahoma is facing, which limit a full-scale moral schooling as well as the independence of teaching. However, we should consider internal factors that might cause teachers to not actively engage in moral education. In this sense, Richard recalled that there was nothing or shallow educational discussion about moral culture at high schools where he was employed:

I can tell you from my own experience from all three schools. There was very little discussion of shaping intentional moral culture...at the first two not at all. There was no conversation about what kind of should have moral culture? What would it look like? How do we get there? Nothing. In the last school I taught at there were some things discussed. But very little follow through on that.

This is an insightful comment in that he was seriously considering the ethos of school conducive to moral education. This comment calls attention to what else we should consider for moral education beyond outward curriculum.

Internal Limitations

There is a large part of interview contents that support secular educational approaches to moral education, according to the 'separation of church and state' phrase invoked in the US Constitution. This principle seems to strictly apply to the US educational policy and operations in public school. Amy expressed her stance on secular education in this regard:

A lot of people think that teaching morals goes hand in hand with religion. I don't think that... And in the public schools, we're not allowed to teach religion. But, it's okay to teach morals...teaching good citizenship skills, how to be a good person, being a volunteer, and activism, and being a good member of the community. Those are important skills we teach without religion in the public schools.

As mentioned above, Amy herself clearly separated teaching morals from teaching religion; however, Frank showed concern about religious overtones of teaching morals. He regarded direct instruction on a certain moral value with disfavor, acknowledging that moral values come from religious belief and social norms:

If I was a parent I wouldn't want my child being taught moral values from someone who maybe didn't understand what my moral values were and I want them to teach them in such a generic way that they were disregarding the differences between different denominations or religion.

Similarly, teaching about 'being a good person' but void of religious overtones was reaffirmed through interviews as an overarching opinion. This corresponds with the classroom observations by Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) as well as this interview results that teachers are rarely willing to deliver moral teaching per se when moral judgments were noticeable in those lessons. (p. 5-6).

Yet, leaving religion aside, skepticism about moral education in itself is also expressed. Mary showed her preference for the term ethics in this line, with the remark, "I think the trick of the moral education is if it is hard enough to attach a judgment to it. I think that is why [I] more like the ethics." Mary admitted she used to teach students "what is the wrong choice [and] what is the right choice" but tried to talk indirectly to encourage them to find a better choice, with statements such as "that choice is going to make your life harder or is that a choice that is going to make your life easier."

The reason for the negative image of moral education in Mary's mind is based on her reluctance to use a normative statement that contains a value judgment. In fact, such an attitude—misunderstanding or distrust of moral education—is dispersed among American teachers and is closely related to preferring character education. Mary's following remark is a good illustration of how character education is expected in US context:

A lot of kids don't have that [moral] motivation. They don't see that at home...that's the kids that we were targeting working to help them develop those skills, just basically manners; being polite, sharing with friends, not interrupting.

In terms of improvement of social skills, however, the question remains: How is internalizing moral behaviors as norms possible without moral choice or judgment? The formation of morality or possession of virtue for becoming a citizen demands moral guidance; that is, it should be more than a mere listing. We have to be attentive to what Richard stated below:

If you [are] in the process of educating students you are already in the business of human making, business of moral formation. And again if you're not intentionally speaking...they are still being formed but by that over curriculum and by that hidden curriculum. And so the idea that we should not teach values at school to me is just doesn't ring true. It's paradoxical because by your very nature you're teaching values... And my argument is that schools should be intentional about that toward the certain end. This idea that we somehow divorced education and morality I don't think it's the case... Therefore, every decision is a moral decision.

What Richard claimed is that moral values are being taught in school no matter what. If so, how we deal with moral issues in and out of curriculum is crucial. We need to bridge a gap between character educational ideal and lack of moral formational process, which is a problem especially in public schools.

Anne depicted her teaching experience in public and private schools as quite different, and we may pick up an idea from the following description:

I didn't feel it was the same for my own experiences. You know in a Catholic school if there was a misbehavior you could directly talk about religion with it... So you could lay on very heavy concepts in private schools. In public schools, you cannot mention anything like that. So I think there's a healthy balance actually where you can have some secular purposes like practicality but also there should be a deeper moral component... as a teacher at a public school I definitely felt nurturing and connected to the kids but it is in a different way with moral habits.

Finding the ways to encourage moral habits and to promote moral components in the setting of secular public education should be an essential part in moral education in its truest sense. Therefore, how do we work toward this goal? Building a wholesome, reliable educational environment in the long term would be the answer when it comes to the influence of the environment in which you live and the people around you, as Richard voiced, "None of us are born in a deserted island completely separate from any influence... I think community is the first place those things are formed."

School is a highly influential community among young people in which peer pressure is strong. This is strengthened by Frank's observation that most students are motivated other people's beliefs about "what they should be doing." We need to be careful how the peer pressure is used because it is a double-edged sword; it may shape students' moral values towards the right direction or not. As Frank states, when the young people see someone treats someone else poorly, "they would correct them [because] there is peer pressure...on the other hand there is also peer pressure not to correct." Eventually, fostering a constructive peer

pressure that would be the nourishment for the students' moral motivation is the key to realize the true aims of moral education.

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