

Moral Formation as a Pedagogy of Welcome

John F. Covaleskie

University of Oklahoma

All education worthy of the name is moral; the academic disciplines of schooling are simply adornments of and/or means to this end. Education takes place in the context of group membership that is normative with regards to standards of moral judgment: in and out of school education helps children attain full membership in their morally normative community. When we make schools places operated by rules and procedures, we stop making them places where education is happening. Our obsession with test scores and academic success blinds us to the purpose of publicly funded common schools: formation of republican citizens. Once we have forgotten that purpose, talking about privatization of education almost seems like a reasonable option.

Schools' role in preparing children for citizenship requires an institutional integrity that communicates to children in clear and unambiguous ways that they belong to a moral community defined in large part by those things members simply *do or do not do*. However, as a practical matter in a morally diverse world, it can be difficult to establish moral communities. Because institutional integrity inevitably violates a supposed goal of neutrality relative to competing versions of the good, there is the temptation to operate under John Rawls's "overlapping consensus" on a "thin conception of the good, in which formal rules and procedures substitute for a substantive moral architecture within which virtue can be fostered in the young."¹ The problem with this thin consensus in schools is that we give our children nothing to love, nothing of substance to belong to or strive for.²

Preparation for democratic life is a process of moral formation: citizenship is an office in which protected rights are commensurate with assumed responsibilities. Specifically, at the heart of republican citizenship is the obligation to thoughtfully balance one's own interests with the common good. The central privilege *and* obligation of the citizen is to seek the *public* good, not just one's individual advantage, through consideration of the things that affect the public (the *res publica*), and this is a *moral* imperative.

Our history makes it difficult to shape a voice of moral authority; our national moral architecture has always been divided. On the one hand, our roots are in a religious holiness tradition brought with the Puritans to New England³ and reflected in a later secular vision of communitarian democracy (for example, John Dewey, Robert Bellah, and Amitai Etzioni). On the other hand is a strand of radical individualism that we today call libertarianism (for example, Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, Henry David Thoreau) and religiously reflected in an individual reading of the Bible and a personal relationship with God. The root question that divides them is whether democracy is ultimately the collective pursuit of the common good or the freedom to pursue one's personal good.

There are thus at least two competing and incommensurable narratives and visions of a good society: (1) there is a strongly communitarian vision rooted in some conception of a covenant, either religious or secular, and (2) alternately, there is a radically individual conception, rooted in a religious ideal of a personal, individual relationship with God or a secular contract theory of society. In one narrative, the basic unit of analysis is the *member*, while in the other narrative it is the *individual*. Faced with this incommensurability, schools may be tempted to resort to a system of allegedly neutral rules and procedures, only to find that no such thing exists. The path to supposed neutrality is to eschew thick moral commitments, but this path is not neutral; it is to join the thin consensus *against* the idea that there is such a thing as a common good. Alternatively, the school can actively foster the moral virtues of republican and democratic citizenship, of membership, while admitting that this is not neutral either.

SCHOOLING FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

Despite the difficulty, educators must make decisions about the kind of schools children will attend, and those schools will be most effective at citizenship formation if they are conscious and intentional about the kind of places they are. The more welcoming the school community is, and the more consistent is its moral architecture, the more likely that it will be effective at the moral formation of the young.

From the perspective of children, schooling is a system that does not treat them as particularly important, with a few exceptions. They know the work they do has no meaning, either to themselves or the teachers who assign it. Students' opportunities for significant contributions to their communities are few and far between. Discipline is often handled as prescribed in behaviorist discipline programs: the behavior is dealt with, and the child is given as little attention as possible.⁴

Although there are no final answers to the nature of the good, and therefore no final answers to the sort of morality we should be passing on to the next generation, we must make thoughtful and reflective choices, and do our best to develop children in a way we carefully judge conducive to their and society's thriving. "Neutrality" on moral issues is neither possible nor neutral.

We need to pause for a moment over "we." The goal of public discourse is to create a public,⁵ and the purpose of the public is to do the work of setting policies that solve common problems in ways that advance the common good. In a functioning republic, the unit of analysis is the member, not the individual, but the radical individuality of libertarianism is a strong and cogent part of our political and intellectual theorizing. This duality of theories of social good presents a serious — perhaps intractable — problem for those who think that it important that schools be morally normative communities, since it makes institutional integrity difficult to realize.

Taking Bellah and many others⁶ seriously, I argue that republican virtue is a necessity for the success of the American democratic experiment: the individual liberty and freedom the US Constitution guarantees is possible only when restrained by those virtues that keep us from anarchy on the one hand and a slide into some

form of despotism on the other. Sometimes the challenge of democratic education is taken to be to build such “republican virtue” within a liberal constitutional system that is neutral on questions of virtue and morality. My point is that, if we want to maintain (create?) a liberal constitutional polity, we cannot be neutral about doing so: we must foster the virtues necessary to that kind of public life. Further, that sort of moral education is not best done by anything we recognize as “teaching,” but is a matter of living in such a way that we invite children (and each other) into a community of moral practice. The deep failure of US education today is moral: we are not educating our young to take their place as citizens of a democratic public.

PRINCIPLES AND INTERESTS

Differences in our body politic are increasingly not about interests, but about *principles*. This was unanticipated by the founders, who assumed that competition about interests would take place in a public arena shaped by an agreement on principles, leading to ever-shifting majorities made up of ever-changing coalitions. The shift is partly due to the partisan media outlets designed to emphasize difference and demonize opposition. The radically different views of the common good sketched above are examples of this division on principle.

In the face of these radically incommensurable realities, schools cannot and should not be neutral, but should actively promote a vision of a democratic republic in which citizens have a deep and active commitment to the common good and to each other. This does not mean either ignoring or refusing to listen to and consider the views of those citizens unable, by reason of faith or ideology, to participate in this public. Indeed, they must be heard as members, even while their preferred policies are thoughtfully, even regretfully, rejected in favor of policies that promote a democratic vision of the common good.

We can do better, though not without making some difficult choices. A regard for the common good will not happen by itself. Nor will wishing make it so. If we want a *polity* that is a *public*, one in which citizens take seriously the notion that there is a common good, we must act deliberately and mindfully to make it so. We must create a certain kind of school community, one created by norms of virtue, not controlled by rules of behavior.

FOSTERING RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

Teaching children to be obedient rather than good has dangerous implications for our political life: our children will not be prepared to take their place as democratic citizens. There are two reasons for this. First, democratic citizens must be able to make decisions freely, not be merely obedient to their masters who manipulate by rewards and punishments. People must be capable of self-government individually before they can be so collectively. Without that capacity fostered and realized, democracy cannot function. We therefore need to consider the relationship between freedom, obedience, and education. Suppose that free will is a potential that needs to be developed: if we manipulate children with rewards and punishments, shaping their behavior to conform to rules, does that limit their ability to develop free will? Conversely, if we treat children as though they are capable of freely making choices, perhaps that will help make them so. This is a complex question I am not going to

tackle here, but treating children with the dignity human beings deserve is the right thing to do, even if the long term stakes are not as high as I suggest, and even more so if they are.

A second way we do not prepare our children for the substantive moral demands of democratic citizenship is that we insufficiently develop their sense of commitment to others and to the common good. There are times when one is obligated as a citizen to support public policies that are good for the public as a whole, but not necessarily best for the individual casting a vote. Speaking of the making of education policy, Dewey tells us:

We are apt to look at the school from an individualistic standpoint, as something between teacher and pupil, or between teacher and parent. That which interests us most is naturally the progress made by the individual child of our acquaintance . . . yet the range of the outlook needs to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.⁷

This is a moral claim, not an empirical one. Note the moral significance to understanding democracy as a pursuit of the common good rather than as “majority rule” or maximum individual liberty. Dewey’s claim is that we are positively obligated to advocate for those social and political arrangements that further others’ good as well as our own, and that nothing less than the success of democracy is at stake. Instilling this view of democratic responsibility may be seen, not entirely incorrectly, as a species of indoctrination, though much hinges on the manner of teaching.

As Benjamin Barber reminds us, this intentional pursuit of the common good does not come easily to us: “We may be natural consumers and born narcissists, but citizens have to be made. . . . Public schools are how a public — a citizenry — is forged and how young, selfish individuals turn into conscientious, community-minded individuals.”⁸ If we think of citizenship as not just a passive state, but an office with serious moral obligations, we see that the process of forging a public becomes the process of morally forming the young. It is beyond obvious that we are not doing a very good job at this task.

Rather than engaging the young in meaningful discussions about “things that matter”⁹ and helping them develop skills they can see value in — rather than affirming the child’s humanity — schools are more likely to seek to control students’ behaviors with regimes of rewards and punishments and constrain their learning along predetermined paths that have little, if anything, to do with the interests, needs, or aptitudes of children in general and even less with the interests, needs, or aptitudes of any particular child. The belief behind my concern is that schools are supposed to be doing the work of citizen formation, and *citizen formation is a work of moral discernment and development precisely because democratic life is morally demanding.*

CAVEATS AND STIPULATIONS

Morality is a social achievement, both in the sense that the morality of any society is an achievement of that society, and in the sense that for the individual to achieve a set of moral commitments is to become a member of some normative community and vice versa. In practical terms, what this means is that the group’s moral norms

become those of the individual members. These norms thus become the standards by which an individual member passes judgment on her own actions and her own self, as well as on others. *Moral formation is the process of achieving membership in a morally normative community.*¹⁰ We are born in community and become individuals only as we become members of morally normative communities.

Which points us directly at the central question of moral education: Whatever any given normative community means by “good,” how does it foster its young into sharing this way of life? The young must belong and share a set of principled commitments *and* be able to critique and reform those commitments.

This points in another way to the need for a degree of autonomy in democratic citizens: they need not only to internalize the moral norms of the community, but they also need to do so in a way that allows for critique: citizens must also be capable of being prophets, pointing out how the group fails to honor its own ideals.¹¹ Such prophecy will always be rare, as prophesy takes both great discernment and great courage, but social decency requires that citizens generally will hear the prophet and consider the critique.

Listening in a certain way to the young is an important part of pedagogical welcoming; it lets the young know they matter and models how members of the public treat each other. Green talks about the importance of what he calls “public speech,” which is not public because of how or where it is *spoken*, but because of how it is *heard*.¹² When we hear the speech of another and consider it as a candidate for our own speech, when we try to hear the validity and the point of view behind a claim, we recognize and make that speech public and we join the speaker as members of a public.

A pedagogy of welcome both encourages membership and makes it something worth earning. On the one hand it is open and welcoming to new members, and on the other hand it presents itself as a community worthy of one’s commitment and dedication. It is the sort of open and affirming community Martin describes in *Schoolhome*, where the model is the family and the goal is the sort of communal bonds of affection that will bring children into their full individuality as members of a strong community.¹³

We must also note, however, that moral formation is not always so gentle: morally formative communities can also be very demanding. The military is a prime example, especially the elite forces. The initiation rituals are extremely demanding and at times even brutal.¹⁴ But the candidates for this form of membership are willing, even eager, to undergo the trials, in part because they *are* trials (and to pass them is a significant achievement worthy of some pride) and in part because the end product (membership) is highly desirable and morally significant.

To point out the variability of moral architectures available, we should note that much of the above applies equally to gangs, membership in which also forms a morally normative community, requires demanding standards of membership, and is considered a worthy achievement (by its members and aspirants). Different communities develop different morally normative practices, but the *form* of the problem

remains: how do we attract and form new members? And the examples of the military and gangs suggest another point: pedagogy and the form of social life desired are related. Neither the military nor gangs are democratic communities: the formation for them need not, and perhaps cannot, be democratic. This raises another set of educational problems related to the existence of different normative communities within one polity, but that is not the set of issues for this essay.

All the above notwithstanding, a serious danger inheres in a pedagogy that creates a public by hearing speech as public: power relations are not equal. It is one thing to say that male members of a public must listen to the speech of women as candidates for their own, that white members of a public must listen to the speech of people of color as candidates for their own, that straight people must listen to the speech of LGBTQ people as candidates for their own. The failure of these dominant groups to accord full public membership to traditionally marginalized groups is what has marginalized them; it is only through correcting this failure that a more inclusive public can be heard into being.

However, the situation here is asymmetrical, both politically and morally. It seems obvious that women, people of color, and LGBTQ people do not have anything like the same responsibility to listen to their oppressors in quite the same way. The implications of this for the shape and nature of public discourse are not entirely clear, but they must be carefully considered, though not in this essay.

A PEDAGOGY OF WELCOME

Focusing primarily now on the formal education of the young, I want to briefly sketch what such an education might be like. Until this point, I have deliberately been speaking of moral formation broadly, and I now want to ground the discussion in the world of practice. The sort of practice we will consider is, to repeat an important point, not at all neutral as to competing visions of the good, or even as to competing visions of democracy. It is firmly committed to the creation of the sort of public envisioned by Dewey, in which the common good is deliberatively pursued *as a moral good and imperative*. We turn now to briefly consider the practice of Vivian Paley¹⁵ and Deborah Meier.¹⁶

In *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Paley tells of the year that she stopped thinking about children excluding one another in the classroom as just the way things are and began thinking about it as a deep problem of and for democratic life, about which she needed to do something. Consequently, she made a rule in her class saying that children could not exclude one another from activities in classroom life: "You can't say you can't play." This rule was made well after the school year had begun and after much discussion with children in her kindergarten class and those in the upper grades. One point of this discussion was to listen to the feelings of the children about exclusion and about ending it. But the other point was to model an experience of democratic life that was not just about majority rule: there was no vote on the new rule. Rather, the decision, regardless of majority opinion, had to reflect good for the community, not the majority.

Further, once the rule was made, its meaning was open to constant interpretation, negotiation, and discussion. The democratic process was as involved in giving meaning

to the rule as in the making of it: the students were confronted with the implications of interpreting the rule one way rather than another, of allowing something to count as exclusion or not. The yearlong discussion about the meaning of the rule — the creation of the norms — was not just an *expression* of the community's consensus. The discussion defined, created, and sustained the normative community. It called a public into being. The discussion was not about abstractions, but about how one member's specific actions affected other particular members.

And here we see how this pedagogy forms conscience: the norms of the community define membership as those who do not exclude. If one's self-image is centered on membership in this group — if membership is desirable — the norms of the community become my norms. If to be a member is to be one who does not exclude, excluding becomes a violation not just of the community's norms, but my own. If I know I hurt you, and I believe hurting others is wrong, I am likely to want to change, not because I am told to do so, but because I realize I am not the sort of person I think I should be.

Paley is actively and intentionally creating a community that will be welcoming to the children. Even those who do not agree with the rule are constantly consulted and valued, are constantly recognized and listened to as worthwhile and valued members of the community. The pedagogy of welcome is very much a part of Paley's practice; her children not only belong there, they *feel* they belong there. Further, she has made the community attractive enough for the children to *want* to belong.

The second practitioner I want to consider is Deborah Meier, who describes her beliefs about democratic education in *The Power of Their Ideas*. Like Paley, Meier insists that democratic education must focus on fostering democratic virtue in the context of democratic life. Like Paley, Meier is not interested in manipulating children through rewards and punishments, as the following story makes clear:

I recently had a conversation that gave me a good deal to think about. Two students had gotten into one of those stupid quarrels. The origins were silly. But what became clear was that one of the kids was a "victim" — over and over he was the subject of teasing and other minor cruelties on the part of his classmates. Everyone knows about it, including we adults. We worry, feel bad, get angry and end up doing very little good.

I asked the student about it and he agreed that the other student was indeed the target of a lot of peer cruelty, and also that the reasons were silly, petty, and unkind. "Which side are you on?" I asked. "His side or his tormentors?"

We were both startled by my question. He said he wasn't really on any side.

I didn't stop, because I was busy thinking about it myself. So I pushed. If someone is being cruel to someone else, if someone is the victim and someone the victimizer, rapist and [raped], abused and abuser — can you really be neutral?¹⁷

No doubt Central Park East, like virtually all schools, had a rule against bullying and violence, but Meier's story reminds us that such rules can never be the point. Meier's job is to help form good citizens, and good citizens must first be good people.

In her conversation with the young man, Meier was engaged in making a democratic citizen: she was teaching him what it means to be a member of a community, a certain kind of person. More precisely, she was helping him to not see another student as "the other," but to see himself and the other as constituting a "we."

She did not — did not have to — tell him that he “should be ashamed of himself,” a statement that would likely have been ineffective. Rather, she invited him to reflect on his behavior in the light of norms of the community at Central Park East, a community of which they both were members. The realization that he would never be “with the abusers” and was in fact an abuser himself was enough. This is how conscience acquires power and becomes action-guiding.

Briefly, we might note that there is some hope in these examples for the problem of asymmetry identified in the previous section: neither Paley nor Meier treated points of view that were undemocratic as equal. The structure of the public conversation was such that the victims of abuse were always privileged. This surely does not eliminate the dangers of asymmetry of power, but it may hint at a way of addressing concerns in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Given the diversity of moral and religious beliefs in the US, it is imperative that citizens be able to talk to each other across their differences, and teaching this skill is one of the most important ways that public schools can help construct and preserve the sort of public that allows democracy to work. In modern complex societies, there are many available alternative normative communities, in addition to the dominant norms of the culture. The young will find some of these groups more attractive than others, and to some extent this is a consequence of the children feeling welcomed into and valued in the group, as well as the significance of the goals and purposes of the group as a whole and the significance and purposes of the individual member.

Hence we see gangs as well as the military are effective in recruiting new members: both are highly motivating normative communities. We really need to make schools more effective in the competition for the allegiance of youth.

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 3. Robert Bellah, *Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
 4. Lee Canter, *Assertive Discipline: Positive Behavior Management for Today's Classrooms*, 4th ed. (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2009).
 5. Thomas F. Green, “Public Speech,” *Teachers College Record* 95, no. 3 (1994): 369–88.
 6. For example, Bellah, *Broken Covenant*; Nancy Faust Sizer and Theodore Sizer, *The Students are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Robert Kunzman, *Grappling with the Good: Talking About Religion and Morality in Public Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).
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 8. Benjamin Barber, *A Passion for Democracy: American Essays*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 220.
 9. Kunzman, *Grappling with the Good*.
 10. John F. Covaleskie. *Membership and Moral Formation: Shame as an Educational and Social Emotion* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2013).
 11. Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2010).

12. Green, "Public Speech."
13. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
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15. Vivian Gussin Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
16. Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
17. *Ibid.*, 85–86.