MORAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS: MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

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Economically speaking we are living in a great time for moral philosophers and educators: the demand for firm values and strict guidelines of action has seldom been as wide and as pervasive. This demand is the natural result of the present situation in the West, which seems to be characterised by the loss of all sense of values: waves of individual and collective physical violence, the growing use of alcohol and drugs by the young, the rejection of traditional western christian values, the lack of political and social commitment, the shift to the right, the ruthless pursuit of material comfort and sensual pleasure.

As has often happened in the past, education is called to account and schools appear as deus ex machina to solve these problems and find a way out of the crisis. Since the Second World War subjects such as civil instruction, sexual education, animal protection, traffic instruction, alcohol, aids and drugs education ... were introduced into the curriculum.

In all these cases the preliminary question has to be: can education at school help to solve these problems? And more specifically as far as moral problems are concerned: can education at school influence the pupils' moral behaviour? And if so, how and in which way?

To begin with I shall deal with the question whether the individual teacher can influence the pupils' moral behaviour. Next I shall wonder if this should be done by means of a separate subject or across the curriculum. Finally I shall examine briefly the impact of the school as an institution on the pupils' moral behaviour.

1. *Moral education and the individual teacher*

Let us begin with the individual teacher. Both in the U.S. and in Europe research has shown that teachers lag far behind parents and peers as far as their influence on adolescents' moral behaviour is concerned[1]. This fact, however, does not preclude that the teachers' influence may be far from negligible. That influence may operate through four strategies: the transfer of values, modeling, the creation of classroom atmosphere, socratic discussion.

1.1. The transfer of values

Can teachers influence their pupils' behaviour by transfer of knowledge, and in the moral domain by transferring their values to the pupils? If so, they must be able to transfer to their pupils these norms and values which they consider to be enriching for the pupils or which are prescribed in the curriculum. They may do so by means of instruction, passing on information to pupils, who are supposed to acquire moral knowledge this way. The classical didactic form of lecturing is still widely used. For many teachers it is the most appropriate choice, because it enables them to avoid problems of discipline.

But is it efficient in bringing about the set aims? In 1982 the research project 'youth problems and education management' was carried out in 24 secondary schools in Holland third-form pupils were probed about their family and school situation, youth culture and leisure time, value orientations and view of the future, well-being and self-image. In the final summarizing report F.J. van der Linden and P. Roeders formulate the following conclusion: "Although young people in general value education, training and learning highly and do not feel very threatened in their well-being at school, they cannot there express their acquired openness, emancipation, spontaneity, autonomy, their need of initiative and participation, of sociability and freedom as they are used to at home, with their friends and in their leisure time. In short: young people can far less easily "be themselves" in the school situation, aspects of their self, of their own person which they experience as positive are inhibited and blocked by structural features of secondary education, such as the traditional way of group-teaching by means of lecturing and transfer of knowledge, which demand mainly passive behaviour on the part of the pupils.

Other features include the often too rigid and hardly democratic regulation and organisation, and a unilateral and indifferentiated use of the punishment-power system"[2].

This brings us to a first, methodological criticism of the transfer of values: the didactic method it uses, lecturing, i.e. the most traditional form of transfer of knowledge, achieves little or no results.

Another point of criticism concerns the contents or the question of the values to be transferred. Neither for the christian[3], nor for the free-thinker[4] is the answer to this question evident: on the contrary, from both sides it has been argued that it is quite impossible to name specifically christian, cq. liberal values.

There is a third fundamental, formal objection to transfer of values as a method of moral education. If moral education is held to be the construction of a value system based on personal reflection and interpretation of norms and values, then the attempt to impose a system of values cannot be termed moral education. If moral education aims at helping pupils to achieve moral autonomy based on personal reflection, then the view of the teacher as a moral authority who has a right to transfer her/his values to the pupils can only be considered as a form of domination[5].

1.2. Modeling

Should the teacher set an example and by her behaviour show the pupil what the right moral behaviour is?
"In the end, though these are harsh words, a child develops a good character largely by following a good example. This is the only way that virtue can be 'taught'"[6], Mary Warnock writes. Moral behaviour is a matter of personality, character and willpower, rather than of knowledge or skills. According to Warnock personality is formed by imitating examples, which may include the consistent and intentionally demonstrated moral behaviour of teachers at school.

This consistency should, according to F.N.J. Hibberd, be restricted to moral behaviour at school. Outside the school gates the teacher does not have to set an example and she has a right to a personal private existence. Hibberd justifies his view the following way: education of necessity is prescriptive. For that matter a teacher cannot prescribe some form of behaviour, while not living up to it herself, without undermining her

educational position. This, however, does not imply that the teacher has to be a model of moral behaviour extra muros: teaching is the representation of a self, the demonstration of a persona in the classroom, but it is not insincere to leave this persona behind when leaving the classroom[7].

R.S. Peters also contends that moral education begins with personality formation: habit and tradition need to be implanted in the child's character before one can reach the stage of the rational construction of a moral system[8]. But, unlike Hibberd, he considers commitment and authenticity on the part of the teacher to be necessary prerequisites to initiate pupils into desired behaviour[9].

Without entering at length into the matter I would like to point out that Hibberd's view seems problematic: from the teacher's angle it may seem perfectly normal to adopt behaviour in the classroom which is different from that at home or in other situations. From the pupils' angle however, such behaviour will seem inconsistent, or worse insincere and hypocritical: the young often expect to find a greater consistency in a person's behaviour than do grown-ups. Of course it is quite legitimate to ask that the teacher should put her personal problems aside in the classroom, because pupils have a right to her total attention and complete devotion to her work.

But this is a different matter from presenting in the classroom a persona which does not coincide with the real person. The first question is how to delineate the private from the public or the professional. The second question touches on the credibility towards oneself and towards the outside world. Finally, one may ask why a different moral behaviour is needed in two worlds: is the private domain the one of personal freedom and of authentic morality and the professional domain that of institutional lack of freedom and of hypocritical morality? This almost schizophrenic moral behaviour and the use of a double standard call for serious questioning.

Apart from these problems the preliminary question remains: does the teacher's example have any impact on her pupils' behaviour? And if so, is there not a real danger of 'bad' examples?

Research which has bearing on these questions has been carried out in the field of socialisation in general, and political socialisation in particular. The conclusions, however, are far from univocal: the teacher's influence is often considered to be minimal (except for the acquisition of knowledge of political institutions and their functioning), but methodo-

logical shortcomings are rather common. With Marchant[10] one can state that the political learning process — and by extension the moral — is influenced by a plethora of interconnected factors. Which of course brings us to the next problem, viz. how to unravel these factors?

A start was given by the broad study that H. Fend and his collaborators at the university of Konstanz set up in the seventies. They did not just want to examine pupils' political socialisation, but their socialisation in general. To find out more about the influence of the school they included 3750 pupils, 404 teachers and 548 parents in their study[11]. Although the scope of the study is very wide and its purpose and methodology are described extensively, it remains a weak point that the data were obtained by means of questionnaires and, as far as the pupils are concerned, by means of self-reports. The latter especially contains a possibility of subjectivity, distortion of observation and insincere answers.

All the same the results certainly deserve the attention of moral educators, especially in view of what they show about the possibility of influencing critical consciousness in general, and specifically a more or less critical attitude towards justice at school and in society. To their own surprise, the authors write[12], they did not, on the whole, find a relation between the attitudes of a school's teaching staff and the pupils' critical consciousness. Generally speaking this indicates that the teachers' views are not transferred directly to the pupils. But it does not necessarily mean there isn't any influence.

Rather, it would seem that this influence shows under well-defined conditions: if relations with the teachers are very negative, views tend to polarize, i.e. pupils develop critical attitudes in opposition to the teachers. In the case of positive social relations the reverse may happen: pupils at large begin to identify with teachers and adopt attitudes from these models of behaviour. If educators want to exert influence when passing fundamental patterns of social orientation to their pupils, they must not count on simple adoption of their views and attitudes by the pupils.

In order to obtain this end supplementary conditions must be met, viz. the creation of good social relations with the pupils. The teacher's mode of conduct is not without consequence for the pupils' attitude. As was already shown conclusively by R. & A.-M. Tausch[13], albeit mainly for elementary schools, a democratic reversible mode of conduct evokes another kind of pupil behaviour than does an authoritarian and irreversible style. For the latter Fend found that pupils are 'better-behaved' and

'more modest', but at the expense of diminished autonomy, sense of initiative and willingness to criticism. So, it seems essential that the teacher stresses the form of his message in order to influence his pupils, and not its contents. It is not the nature of the message that incites the pupils to adopt it, but the way it is brought.

This finding clearly contains a great danger with respect to the direction of the influence. I will return to this problem later.

1.3. The atmosphere of the classroom.

Fend's study leaves no doubt about the importance of the affective relation between teacher and pupils for exerting a moral influence on the latter. This is also P. McPhail's conclusion. He taught for 10 years in secondary schools and for 4 years in teacher training. In 1967 he became director of the projects of the Schools Council on Moral Education at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge; in this capacity he developed the well-known Lifeline Project[14]. In a later book he gives a series of recommendations for teachers of moral and social education. This list is the result of his observation of behaviour of teachers he considered to be the most efficient moral and social educators[15]. I shall not quote this list in full, but only McPhail's final comment:

> "I hope that the above list of do's and don'ts will not encourage anyone to think that he or she needs a perfect or near perfect score to be a healthy moral and social educator. Still less should it be taken to imply that the teacher has to be a guru or personal saviour. The message which will always be conveyed by the good teacher to his or her pupils and is of first importance is that the teacher cares about, and is on the side of, those whom he teaches. (...) The morally and socially destructive teacher is the rare individual who, consciously or unconsciously, nurtures his own ego by destroying the self-respect and confidence of those unfortunate enough to be given into his care".

In their theory of moral development C. Gilligan and N. Noddings have stressed the concept of 'caring' as the cornerstone of female moral thought in contrast with Kohlberg's masculine 'justice' concept. Their theory too seems to point to the necessity of taking the affective atmo-

sphere of the classroom seriously.

In itself this consideration is correct, but the danger arises that an essential issue, viz. the social context of moral behaviour, is passed by silently. In his criticism of Lifeline J. Fellsches rightly remarks that young people cannot be expected to create a better world, i.e. a world that satisfies their personal needs (the starting point of Lifeline), if the social structure and the balance of power of the world in which they live are not taken into consideration[16]. Caring alone will not bring about substantial changes in this situation.

A similar criticism of N. Noddings is formulated by Sarah Lucia Hoagland: "Caring cannot be insular and it cannot ignore the political reality, material conditions, and social structure of the world"[17].

In conclusion: the atmosphere of the classroom may be an indispensible means of influencing the young morally, only by its content and its direction can we judge if that influence is morally acceptable. In other words: the affective climate of the classroom is no more than a formal element in moral education; the quality of that education resides in its content.

1.4. Socratic discussion.

Over the past decades the theory of moral development and moral education has been dominated by the work of L. Kohlberg and the reactions it has provoked. There are probably various reasons for this wide response in educational circles. In the first place there is the influence of and the parallelism with Piaget's authoritative theory of cognitive development.

There is also the broad scope and the posited universality of the theory: it offers a view of the total development of moral judgment in the form of gradual, coherent stage structure. For educators the theory is particularly attractive by the stress it places on cognitive development and on rationality, and by the promise of concrete results that it holds. Moreover, with the exception of values clarification there were no alternatives at hand for moral education.

Kohlberg's theory offered exactly what was needed at the time both in social and in educational respect: a hold, a firm ground in an ocean of uncertainty. Another point in favour of the theory was the fact that the responsibility for the success of moral development lay with the pupils themselves. This fitted in completely with the spirit of the times: educa-

tional innovations all aimed at more democracy and pupil participation.

The application of Kohlberg's moral theory to education was initiated by M. Blatt. In P. Sharf's words: "While teaching at the university of Chicago, Kohlberg encountered Moshe Blatt, an ambitious doctoral student who believed that by engaging students in Socratic moral discussions one might create the conditions for moral change. Developing dilemmas from Biblical themes, Blatt found that it was possible to encourage sizable changes in moral reasoning over a three-month period. Replicating this study in both Chicago and Boston suburban schools, Blatt and Kohlberg found that the process of discussion developed in Blatt's "Sunday school" class might work with a variety of children"[18].

The teacher's role chiefly amounted to the stimulation and organisation of discussions with a moral dimension. In the course of these pupils were to be confronted with arguments one stage above their own(+1). Through cognitive conflict moral judgment would gradually develop. Every higher stage would offer a more complex and better insight into moral problems.

In spite of the seeming success of the rational discussion method and the original enthusiasm in the world of education critical comments appeared after some time. Objections were raised against the use of hypothetical dilemmas: both with regard to pupil motivation and with regard to their level of moral development a considerable difference showed, when real-life dilemmas were used, taken from or close to the pupils' own experience. The considerable discrepancy between pupil scores in hypothetical dilemmas and real-life ones caused Kohlberg to change his method. Discussions had to be integrated in the context of the school, i.e. in order to obtain lasting results in the moral behaviour of the pupils the school setting and functioning had to be radically changed. This new approach — the primacy of school structure over moral development — will be dealt with later.

2. *Moral education as a separate subject or across the curriculum.*

In his excellent book "Vorming in waarden en normen" J.A. van der Ven starts from the assumption that moral education cannot be confined to a single subject or course, because its scope transcends subjects and courses and in fact unites them. Moral education is about norms and values that pervade the starting-points and aims of any course[19].

At first sight this position seems right and justified: moral education is so important and so much interwoven with the total learning process at school that it must not be restricted to one single subject isolated from the rest of the educational activities.

And yet, there is a serious drawback. Van der Ven's view reminded me at once of some remarks my late colleague and friend the sexologist J. van Ussel made on sexual and relational education at school. Here too some pleaded for the integration of this education into existing subjects. In practice, van Ussel remarked, this amounted to the fact that no one felt responsible for venturing onto the thin ice of intimate relations and sexuality.

I would like to argue for the introduction of a specific subject in the curriculum for several reasons. One is that it would be the affirmation of an already existing situation in Belgium and other European countries, where parents who want their childeren to be exempted from religious education can choose moral education. But there are also obvious problems attached to teaching moral education across the curriculum. Van der Ven admits that moral education deals with topics that can scarcely be treated in other subjects[20]. One can request that existing subjects make enough room for moral education; I'm afraid though that these will remain pious hopes. Indeed, most of the time subject matter is so vast for all school subjects in secondary education that complaints about overloaded programmes already abound.

Another point is the competence of teachers. Moral education — certainly when considered as argumentative communication from an ethical perspective (van der Ven) — often deals with difficult and rather technical matter requiring a thorough training. As far as the Belgian situation is concerned I can safely state that nowhere in the existing institutes of teacher training such a formation is provided, except for the specific teacher training courses in moral education. In other countries similar conditions seem to prevail[21]. While there is a fast growing body of knowledge in several areas of science, it looks as if less and less attention is being paid to fundamental questions of meaning and value in the training of scientists and educators. Besides, van der Ven's argument may be used in another sense: moral education is so important that it should be entrusted to a specific subject instead of being left to the goodwill of non-specialist teachers. The creation of a separate subject does not imply that the responsibility of other teachers for moral education disappears. The

presence of a subject teacher may help to develop moral education in the school as a whole by the coordinating and centralising role he/she may have in the schoolteam.

3. *The school and moral education.*

Since the seventies sociology of education has produced a stream of publications dealing with the school's influence on pupils' attitudes. In the Anglo-Saxon world classics like Michael F.D. Young "Knowledge and Control"(1971) and S. Bowles & H. Gintis "Schooling in Capitalist America"(1976) provided evidence for the proposition that education passes on the dominant values of capitalist society, chiefly by means of the hidden curriculum. On the Continent similar studies appeared everywhere.

If everyone is agreed on the general tenor of the argument, viz. that education is an epiphenomenon of economic relations and an important vehicle in transferring bourgeois values, it is much less clear how this process unfolds, what exactly is learned, and how. The Dutch educationalist and former Minister of Education and Science J.A. van Kemenade, who did research into the Catholic Dutch and their education, is critical of this argument: "On the basis of the available material it may even be doubted whether education exerts a normative influence to the degree that is supposed. In this respect, it became clear from an earlier inventory of research data on the influence of the school on religious attitudes and behaviour that parental religiosity in particular, as well as some other general factors, are of great importance for the religious formation of pupils and that education offers no or scarcely any contribution to the development (or alteration) of religious values, attitudes or behaviour"[22].

But there is a difference between the transfer of religious values and the transfer of the dominant values of capitalist society, such as acceptance of hierarchical relations, deference to authority, observing punctuality and respecting order — values that need to be inculcated into the future labour force. Though reference could be made to empirical research like P. Bourdieu's in France and P. Willis' in England to build a firm case for the relation between school ethos and such a transfer of capitalist values, I will have recourse to another, less ideologically loaded, example to illustrate the influence of schools as institutions on the

value system of pupils, viz. the nineteenth-century British Public School system. Though there was some variety in aims among different institutions, on the whole Public Schools constituted a very closed system with several common features. Many of the founders thought society showed serious failings against which the young had to be protected. At the same time they had to be educated to reform that society.

In order to achieve these aims schools had to function like societies in miniature, characterized by strict rules, hierarchy and discipline. Pupils possessed almost no privacy whatsoever, a situation ensured in part by the so-called "house system", meant to promote group solidarity and cohesion. According to Honey[23] who did some thorough research into this system, it brought about a suppression of feelings of weakness and even a ban on the expression of any feelings at all. The final result was the well-known "stiff upperlip" of the British upper-class.

No doubt a lot of pupils never realized such aims as obedience and caring for the suffering of follow men[24]. Yet it cannot be denied that Public Schools had a considerable influence on the social and moral values of their pupils: the most conspicuous of these were an often life-long solidarity among the alumni — the 'old-boy network' — and a strong commitment to the institution. If there can be little doubt about the moral influence of the Public School, the system cannot be a paragon of moral education: for practical reasons — the system cannot be extended to education at large — and for theoretical ones — uncertainties around the realisation of aims and unwanted side effects — it is unfeasible to generalise Public Schools.

These remarks also apply — albeit to a lesser degree — to Kohlberg's experiment with the Just Community School. The basic idea was to create a community in which rules and moral behaviour would develop in consultation on the basis of the principle of justice. Starting from E. Durkheim and K. Lewin, Kohlberg was convinced that moral development could be stimulated to reach the highest level under the pressure of an egalitarian and democratically constituted group authority[25].

Here too results are not univocal: on the one hand group norms have been internalized by its members, on the other the question remains how one can reach the highest stages of moral development. Indeed there is a real danger that the pressure of group members whose moral reasoning is at stage 2 or 3 keeps the group's moral thought and behaviour at such lower stages[26]. In short, the Just Community School may claim some

influence on the moral behaviour of its members, but it is unclear in how far this will involve a durable and extramural influence, going in the direction of Kohlberg's postconventional level.

As far as the influence of the school on the moral behaviour of the pupils is concerned I return once more to H. Fend's extensive study. Although the latter deals with pupil socialisation at large, there can be little doubt that his findings apply to the moral domain as well. His conclusion is that the school indeed educates not only at the cognitive level, but also at that of attitudes and values. As an institution, the school transfers basic experiences with regard to the meaning of effort, performance and principles of (un)just distribution. It shows pupils daily that there are individual differences in evaluation according to their performance. In so doing it transfers fundamental evaluations of performance and essential views on the functioning of social reality. However, this influence of the school must be placed in the context of other data which transcend the school: sex, social background, regional differences. Moreover, schools not only educate in a so-called positive sense, but also in a negative one: often pupils develop defences against the institution; calculating and conformistic attitudes may be learned[27].

Which brings us to questions such as: is it morally desirable that pupils who like to go to school conform blindly and uncritically to an institution which in many respects prrevents reflection and criticism?

4. *Conclusion.*

In an extensive and very interesting contribution to a recent publication dealing with the emergence of morality in young children E. Turiel, M. Killen and C.C. Helwig[28] show there is great inter- and intra-cultural variety in moral behaviour. This implies that there is not one global source of experience from which the young acquire their sociomoral development. Moral behaviour is a complex phenomenon, which cannot be explained by the existence of something like a general disposition, but is on the contrary a varied pattern that may be mapped by unraveling different kinds of social experience. It is not just a process in which society transmits from above by means of authoritative institutions or persons 'in authority' patterns of behaviour to the child. "We believe there is reason to assume that implicit in some of this century's major

social scientific analyses of social and moral development is a recognition of heterogeneity of social orientations, in societies and individuals, reflecting distinct epistemological concerns", Turiel, Killen and Helwig conclude.

From this emerge the possibilities of and the restrictions on the moral action of the moral teacher: it is possible to create social experience in the classroom that will have a positive effect on moral behaviour. In spite of institutional and structural pressure which no teacher can escape in his educational activities the classroom remains a sphere of relative autonomy in which some space for personal initiative on the part of both teacher and pupils is still left. The teacher is not completely determined in his actions by educational structures. Whether his actions extend beyond the classroom, whether moral thought and behaviour in the context of the classroom has any effect in other social situations is an open question.

Much will depend on the relevance of the subject matter for the pupils, i.e. the degree to which it addresses their needs and problems and offers sensible answers and acceptable solutions. This does not imply that the classroom should become for pupils another kind of "haven in a heartless world".

To my mind moral education must strive to contribute to a better world. It is incorrect and dangerous, as M.W. Apple contends about the political Right in the V.S., "to shift the blame for unemployment, for the supposed breakdown of 'traditional' values, and for tensions within the family *from* the economic, cultural, and social policies and effects of capital *to* the school and other public agencies"[29].

It is just as unjustified to expect education to remedy the economic, social, and moral evils of this society. Neither a blind faith in limitless educational possibilities nor a discouraging defeatism about social determinism can offer a way out. What is left for the teacher is to keep on making the best use she can of her limited possibilities. And keep in mind these words from a German critical educator: "Gewiss ist Erziehung nicht der Hebel der Veränderung; aber sie macht sichtbar, wo er anzusetzen ist. Erziehung übernimmt in der Gesellschaft die Doppelrolle von Funktionalität und Disfunktionalität: gewiss steht sie im Dienst der gegenwärtig herrschenden Einrichtungen der Gesellschaft; zugleich aber bringt sie den widerspruch zwischen gesellschaftlicher Wirklichkeit und gesellschaftlicher Realerwartung zum Bewusstsein"[30].

NOTES

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2. F.J. van der Linden & P.J.B. Roeders, *Schoolgaande jongeren, hun leefwereld en zelfbeleving*, Nijmegen, Hoogveld Instituut, 1983, p. 159 (my translation).
3. J.A. van der Ven, *Vorming in waarden en normen*, Kampen, Kok Agora, 1985, pp. 168-9.
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16. J. Fellsches, *Moralische Erziehung als politische Bildung*, Heidelberg, Quelle & Meyer, 1977, p. 214 sqq. and H. Schmidt, *Didaktik des Ethikunterrichts I, Grundlagen*, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1983, pp. 44-8.
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18. P. Scharf, *Moral Education*, Davis (Calif.), Responsible Action, 1978, p. 88.
19. J.A. van der Ven, o.c., p. 7.
20. Ibid., pp. 188-9.
21. Cfr. H. Schmidt, o.c., p. 13.
22. J.A. van Kemenade (red.), *Onderwijs: Bestel en beleid*, Groningen, Wolters-Noordhoff, 1981-2, p. 111.
23. J.R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe*, London, Millington, 1977, cited in J. Strivens (see note 24).
24. J. Strivens, 'Values and the Social Organization of Schooling', in P. Tomlinson & M. Quinton (eds.), *Values Across the Curriculum*, London & Philadelphia, Falmer, 1986, pp. 196-9.
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