

1987

The role of a counselor in moral education

Etta Walters Miller
University of Northern Iowa

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Miller, Etta Walters, "The role of a counselor in moral education" (1987). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2948.
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The role of a counselor in moral education

Abstract

In reviewing the current literature concerning the role of counselors in moral education it was discovered that the vast majority of available materials were directed toward educators in general rather than any specific segment of that population (i.e., counselors). It thus became necessary to make the assumption that school boards, administrators, teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and any other school workers had been equally addressed as moral educators.

THE ROLE OF A COUNSELOR IN MORAL EDUCATION

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Etta Walters Miller

December 1987

This research paper by: Etta Walters Miller

Entitled: THE ROLE OF A COUNSELOR IN MORAL EDUCATION

has been approved as meeting the research paper
requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Robert T. Lembke

30 October 1987
Date Approved

Adviser

Jack F. Kimball

10/30/87
Date Approved

Second Reader of ~~Research~~ Paper

Dale R. Jackson

10/30/87
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

In reviewing the current literature concerning the role of counselors in moral education it was discovered that the vast majority of available materials were directed toward educators in general rather than any specific segment of that population (i.e., counselors). It thus became necessary to make the assumption that school boards, administrators, teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and any other school workers had been equally addressed as moral educators.

As an introductory statement of clarification, Random House Dictionary of the English Language (Stein, 1981) defined moral education as "instruction in moral rules of conduct for the purpose of developing good character traits and ethical behavior" (p. 930).

To further introduce the role of moral educators, Joseph (1986) quoted syndicated columnist William Raspberry to have said that "a) education was inescapably moral as well as being an intellectual enterprise, b) all parents don't handle moral education well, c) no learning experience can be values free, and d) schools can't avoid teaching values" (p. 35).

Roles of Moral Educators

Straughan (1982) developed four distinguishing roles for moral educators. These general categories were labeled a) prescriptivist, b) emotivist, c) existentialist, and

d) applicator of principles. A brief description has been included for each of those roles along with roles suggested by other authors which appeared to correlate with Straughan's four general divisions.

Prescriptivist

R. M. Hare provided the format for this general role classification. His book called The Language of Morals, as cited by Straughan (1982), ascribed universality to morality. Hare saw educators as guides who would prescribe logical, consistently applicable moral conduct for children.

Prescriptivists also saw moral educators as evaluators. In that role educators would express their tastes and preferences, teach children how to make decisions, and criticize and grade their decisions. They would also advise, admonish, warn, persuade, and dissuade children. Hare advised educators to also promulgate rules for children. In addition, Hare also required decisions concerning commitment to one's own actions and advocated having the same expectations from others in similar circumstances.

Smith (1986) likewise advocated evaluation using Kohlberg's techniques. His research project reported benefits in a) teaching methods, b) children's behavior, and c) children's mental processes.

Some of the specific roles purported by the literature which seemed to relate to prescriptivism were:

- 1) Character builders, as noted by Joseph (1986).
- 2) Transmitters of social and moral values, indicated by Wynne and Walberg (1986).
- 3) Teachers/instructors of morals, also cited by Joseph (1986), who believe that they are part of a team that views morals as part of school learning.
- 4) Objectivists, who Straughan (1982) said should not prefer their own interest over others nor their views as privileged.
- 5) Activists, according to Straughan (1982), who wouldn't leave moral education to chance or to a hidden curriculum.
- 6) Supporters of lessons taught at home, which Joseph (1986) saw as the duty of every adult, especially including school personnel.
- 7) Upholders of tradition, which Wynne and Walberg (1986) said could be accomplished without making children of lower achievement or those from non-traditional homes feel uncomfortable.
- 8) Interventionists, because Schlaefli, Rest, and Thomas' (1985) research showed moral education programs to have produced modest, but definite results.

9) Listeners to the American majority belief that moral education and ethics courses have healing power, which Parker (1985) also stated should be used to transmit and improve the culture.

10) Serious moral agents, who Callan (1985) said wanted moral beliefs to be perpetuated in childrens' lives and did not believe that children could be expected to make moral judgments without a solid foundation of moral beliefs already in place, and

11) Channels, as Straughan (1982) called those who provided a pass between authoritarianism and vacuous relativism.

Emotivist

This general role, according to Straughan (1982), had its origins in the philosophies of A. J. Ayer (author of Language, Truth and Logic) and C. L. Stevensen (author of Ethics and Language). Morality was depicted as a matter of exerting influence by the expressions of one's sentiments. Moral language was meant to convey and influence emotional attitudes. The specific roles likely to be included as emotivistic were:

1) Influencers, explained to be those educators who expressed their feelings in the form of approval or disapproval

and who also tried to persuade others to believe as they did, and

2) Subjectivists, who believed that because different people have different emotional reactions, morality was simply a matter of personal belief (i.e., if it felt right, it was right).

Existentialist

Jean Paul Satre's philosophy, as reviewed by Straughan (1982), was foundational for this general role. There wasn't a systematic unified ethical theory developed for existentialism, but the philosophy implied that an action was moral only if it was freely chosen and performed. Man was considered nothing but that which he had made himself to be, due to the fact that his power of choice was all important. It didn't matter what was chosen since no choice could be worse than any other. There were not external authorities or principles to justify any actions. Man was left alone without any excuses. Morals could not be taught because that would involve authority.

Straughan (1982) saw existentialists as trusting their own instincts; however, he saw that also as a form of universalism. By that he meant that many or all actions completed by any human being would ultimately effect another in some direct or indirect way.

The specific roles which could be related to existentialism were:

1) Relativists, as seen by Johnson (1980) to have implied that what was right was right only for the one making the determination,

2) internalists, those who used no external rules,

3) clarifiers, who Hall and Davis (1975) said guided students to clarify their own thoughts and feelings, and

4) hominologists, explained by Foster (1971) to have been promoters of self-study and developers of self-determined values in a direct, non-directive manner.

Applicator of Principles

This general role stemmed from an argument developed by Aristotle which encompassed a wide variety of views. The underlying theme, according to Straughan (1982), was that persons of principle drew attention to their behavior and became, in effect, moral agents. The implications were that having principles was somehow ultimately connected with being moral. The resultant effect was that moral judgments made in one situation must be generally applicable to other similar situations.

Roles most similar to the general role of principles applicator were:

1) Moral guides, seen as not issuing specific unequivocal instructions, but who offered a more abstract set of considerations and directives which could be appealed to in order to justify particular choices.

2) Universal prescriptivists, seen as advocating generally applicable principles which had been arrived at in a rational non-arbitrary way in order to determine what should be done in any given set of circumstances.

3) External-internalists, described as having seen educators who utilized principles as being basic to morality, but who saw the need for a logical process of deduction.

4) Communicators of values, which Smith (1986) saw as the heart of educators' responsibilities, especially as they helped children gain the perspectives to see the connectedness in life so as to build hope and trust.

5) Interpreters of values, who should help children translate principles into practical responses in actual experience.

6) Reasoner-rationalizers, encouraged by Harmin (1977) to emphasize the intellectual approach to moral decisions, and

7) Authenticators, referred to by Leahy (1986) as people who can help children integrate their thinking, feeling, and acting.

Conclusions

It was somewhat disheartening to have found so few references in the materials reviewed which were directed specifically at school counselors. The need, therefore, became apparent to assess which of the recommended roles of educators would transfer most appropriately to counselors.

Among the four general categorical roles it didn't appear that any of them could be exclusively adopted by school counselors. The applicator of principles role might have been the most readily adaptable to counseling since it advocated that certain moral decisions or actions which were effective in one situation might generally be applicable to other similar situations. Other roles in that category which could be used in counseling might be those of guide, external-internalist, reasoner-rationalize, and authenticator; all of which were non-directive, yet goal oriented.

Certain aspects of an existential role could be applicable to counseling. The assumption that morality must be freely chosen and performed by every individual independently would be acceptable attitude for counselors to assume since the consensus is that people do change themselves. However, existentialism may go too far, especially in dealing with children, when it said that there was no external authority and that no choice was better or worse than another. That

and that no choice was better or worse than another. That didn't seem rational or healthy for children who, psychologists agree, need structure to feel secure.

The role of prescriptivist appeared to be somewhat rigid and could become manipulative if overused. The concept that a conscious decision should be made before action is taken was a tenable position for counselors to take as long as alternatives were presented. A dangerous aspect of the concept was the inclusion that others be expected to perform similarly to the decisions of the educators. This would invalidate the foundational principle of self-responsibility so vital to effective counseling.

An emotivistic role would perhaps be the least transferable of the four general roles discussed. Under no circumstances would counselors intentionally set out to exert their own power and authority, through the use of emotionally persuasive methods, to influence a client to adopt their entire values system.

Personal Comments

Since the term moral education is not a commonly discussed phenomenon in current practice, it was a revelation to have discovered such a wealth of information on the subject. The bulk of material available had been written in the 1970's and 1980's which indicated that, although it had been assumed

emphasize it was very new. It was thrilling to read Daniels (1975) description of "normative reasoning" as the wave of the future in moral education and counseling. It involved such things as trying to connect norms to evaluations we have made or trying to show that the norms we accept are, in their turn, defensible. This was directly in accordance with Harmin's role of reasoner-rationalizer which in turn fit with the general role of applicator of principles.

Another surprise for me was that, although the majority opinion has tended to have associated morality with religion, there was very little or no mention of religion.

The impression was made obvious to me that my role as a counselor/educator must be primarily that of a model of high morals, a supporter of lessons taught at home, and a communicator of the basic common sense values which have worked successfully for humanity for as long as history has reported human behavior.

Finally, it is hoped that the efforts completed here will have some impact on the future roles of counselors in public education. The ultimate desire would be that the lives of children, the true formers of the future, would be enriched by counselors assuming a role in moral education.

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