

Book Review: Jackson, P.W., Boostrom, R.E. & Hansen, D.T. (1993). *The moral life of schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Abstract

The Moral Life of Schools focuses on an empirical study conducted by Jackson, Boostrom, and Hanson investigating the moral dimensions of schools and classrooms. Observational accounts of moral complexities, ambiguities, and tensions in elementary and secondary classrooms are present in the book, with analysis and questioning posed at the end of each observation intended to stimulate moral consideration and reflection in the reader. The authors conclude that all classrooms are infused with “moral consequences” (p.xii) that impact the moral development of students.

Introduction

Over time, educational institutions have frequently been noted for their role in developing not only the academic potentials of students, but also their moral capacities (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Richardson & Fenstermacher, 2001; Tom, 1984). What continues to be troublesome is that a considerable proportion of moral education and development occurs in schools unintentionally. Although frequently imperceptible morally significant events are embedded in all aspects of schooling and are reinforced by teachers through their actions, reactions, and decisions.

The Moral Life of Schools, by the academics and education researchers Jackson, Boostrom, and Hanson (1993), uncovers and contextualizes “the events and features of moral consequences” (p. xii) hidden in classrooms demonstrating the moral complexities and ambiguities teachers experience. The aim of the text is not to make recommendations for moral education or instruction, rather, the authors’ purpose is to “offer a generalized way of looking at and thinking about what goes on in classrooms” through a moral lens (p. xii). The book emphasizes the need for continuous reflection on one’s teaching practice. Through reflection, teachers may analyze morally significant events and matters in their teaching encounters that may lead to greater awareness of the potency of their actions, and in turn, an increased intentional focus on the moral development of students.

Content of the Book

The Moral Life of Schools is geared towards an audience of teachers, school administrators, and teacher educators. It presents rich ethnographic accounts of observational data collected over a period of two-and-

a-half years within the curricular investigation they call “The Moral Life Project.” The research project included the study of 18 classrooms at the elementary and secondary level in order to “investigate the ways in which moral considerations permeate the everyday life of schools” (p. xiv).

For the purposes of the study, the researchers drew a definition of morality that was general and open, one which developed as the study progressed. Their working definition defines “moral [as]... refer[ing] to desirable human conduct and to personal qualities, such as virtue or strength of character” (p. xv). One would assume that the authors would provide a clear definition of “moral”, yet this is not the case. Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen leave the term moral open to development as the study progresses. Although this could be a point of criticism, it lends itself to the discussion of multiple morals, or what Strike (1999) referred to as “moral pluralism” (p.24). The fluidity of the term moral, as it emerges from the research, allows for the inclusion of diverse perspectives on and understandings of the term, while keeping the observational protocol clear and consistent. An entire chapter in the book, entitled “Looking for the moral: An observer’s guide,” is dedicated to describing and expanding upon their definition of moral and making clear their investigative observational protocol.

The title of the book, *The Moral Life of Schools*, indubitably identifies its focus. The authors clearly state their underlying belief that schools and teachers have a significant impact on the moral development of students, whether they are conscious of it or not. Accounts presented in the book offer numerous examples of different classroom situations, structures, and pedagogies illustrating that teaching is flexible, multi-dimensional, and deeply influenced by teachers. Following each classroom account, the authors examine and scrutinize the events of moral consequence and the reader is presented with a series of questions from multiple perspectives. Most interesting is the analytical style that Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen adopt, as they do not offer suggestions or solutions to the problems in the cases. This space for individual interpretation motivates the reader to ask questions, analyze, and in turn become actively engaged in reflection on the described classroom events. Apparently this is a skill that the authors intentionally attempt to hone in the reader.

Format of the Book

The book is divided into four parts and a postscript. Part One describes the purpose, aims, and observational framework of the project. Observational categories are explained in great detail, with justifications for and examples of what to look for in data collection and how to access such information. Parts Two and Three of the text present observational data from eight classrooms, with cases divided equally to cover moral complexities and ambiguities. The fourth and final section of the book is a discussion addressing the analysis and results of the data more broadly, identifying points of interpretation, researcher bias, and conclusions. The postscript reveals the intention of the book, inviting readers to identify the moral dimensions of teaching in their own practice, and encouraging readers to become more familiar with the topics covered in the book.

Overall, the language and style of the book are very accessible. The authors have shaped the text to lend a sense to readers that they are thinking aloud. The authentic observational cases and stimulating questions throughout the book make it an interesting, enjoyable, and easy read. Classroom teachers and teacher educators would benefit most from reading this text as it offers in-depth analysis of morally significant classroom dynamics as well as opportunities for reflection, activities which are easily overlooked in everyday practice.

Thematic Highlights

Role of Schools in Moral Education

Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen claim that schools and classrooms are infused with moral messages. They divide moral education into two categories: intentional practices that attempt to explicitly teach morals to students, and unintentional moral messages that occur without teachers’ conscious awareness. These hidden

moral messages occur frequently and are embedded in all aspects of schooling, ranging from the set-up of the classroom furniture to teachers' demeanors. The authors suggest that of the two categories, the unintentional moral lessons are significantly more profound in teaching values and developing the characters of students.

Moral Complexities in the Classroom

Observational accounts describing the nuances of daily teaching practice demonstrate that classrooms are charged with moral complexity. The eight cases presented in the book show that teachers are constantly making decisions that are morally significant. The second section in *The Moral Life of Schools* opens with the example of Ms Hamilton, a first grade teacher, who consistently demonstrates fairness, honesty, compassion, and patience in her practice. The ways in which she interacts with her students, her flexibility, her attentiveness, and even the way her chair is angled to allow a view of the entire classroom, all denote a sense of moral awareness with the potential to positively influence her pupils. Despite her positive moral influences, the reader is reminded that even the most morally conscious teachers may behave ambiguously. This is exemplified when Ms. Hamilton is observed making a moral blunder in asserting her dominance by refusing to allow a student who repeatedly requests, almost begs, to correct an error that she pointed out to him. Unmoved, Ms Hamilton removes the work from the student and informs him that it is merely a colouring error on a math activity and it will not affect his grade. Persistent, the student insists, only to be turned down once again. In this situation, the reader may question Ms Hamilton's lesson: Is it more important to achieve good grades or to learn through trial and error? What subjects does Ms Hamilton value? Her apparent lapses in judgment emphasize the complexities in teaching and reaffirm the notion that all teachers, including those with a developed sense of moral consciousness, make mistakes and should therefore regularly engage in reflection.

The case of Father Maran, a firm, rigid, and serious math teacher, follows the account of Ms Hamilton. It is interesting that the authors decided to include Father Maran in the section of the book that is meant to demonstrate positive moral influences, for although there is no doubt that some of the qualities Father Maran exhibits are positive, there is a great deal in his behavior that lends itself to criticism. It is not the seriousness, the firmness, or the on-stage theatrics displayed by Father Maran that could be questioned. Rather, the ways in which Father Maran treats the students, singling them out, being short with them, and unnecessarily speaking to them in a raised tone are morally dubious. In one situation, Father Maran responds impatiently to a student's requests for further clarification or explanation of two of the math questions. Is Father Maran abusing his position of power and using humiliation to encourage the boy to study harder so that he answers questions correctly? To the critical eye, it would appear so. What is Father Maran teaching the boys in his class about patience, compassion, and respect? Although the authors are "convinced of Father Maran's potency as a moral agent" (p. 84), I would recommend that the reader reconsider this quick judgment and analyze the manners exhibited by Father Maran with reference to Campbell's (2003) description of an ethical teacher.

Contrary to the image of the teacher as a severe authoritarian, suspicious and disdainful of students, the ethical teacher projects the image of a kindly and caring person . . . by smiling [at students], . . . by speaking to them as fellow human beings, by being consistent and reliable in temperament, by being attentive to students' anxieties, and by recognizing that kindness does not equal weakness. (p. 34)

Moral Ambiguities in the Classroom

The section on moral ambiguities in *The Moral Life of Schools* demonstrates examples of questionable teaching practices that are ineffective in positively developing the moral characters of students. Although many of the cases presented in this category deserve the criticism they receive, Mrs. Johnson, a teacher in an all boys' school for African Americans may not. Mrs. Johnson is scrutinized in the book for hanging posters of successful African Americans in the hallway outside of her classroom, for displaying the works of all her students, including those whose compositions are "not pleasant to look at" (p. 133), and for keeping her classroom decorated with moral messages. Mrs. Johnson deserves more sympathy and should be defended since, based on the accounts presented, she appears to be a fair, equitable, caring, and

compassionate teacher. Despite the physical space restrictions of her classroom, she respects and promotes the ethnicity of her students and appreciates the accomplishments of all individuals, not just the ones who are academically gifted. Mrs. Johnson accomplishes what Fenstermacher (2001) referred to as, “a classroom community which advances the moral and intellectual capacities of [her] students” (p. 642), a community that is founded on mutual respect, empathy, tolerance, and sharing. The reader is left wondering whether Mrs. Johnson deserved the negative analysis she received from the observer.

Conclusion

This book is of particular value and interest to individuals intending to undertake a qualitative study that requires extensive observation. It also aims to present ethnographic descriptions, as *The Moral Life of Schools* is essentially a compilation of data collected during a research project, and as such, presents a good model for conducting similar studies. The authors do not follow the conventional structure of empirical reporting, nor do they discuss in great detail research methodology, theoretical framework, modes of analysis, or conclusions. However, they do provide opportunities to explore how observational data are collected, how to select categories for semi-structured studies, how to account for research bias, and methods for data analysis. Of greatest value for readers is the opportunity to engage in data analysis and moral reflective practice with the guidance of Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen, as they offer ample opportunities for personal critique and interpretation throughout the book.

The reader may find inconsistencies between his or her personal interpretations and analysis of the observational accounts presented and those of the authors. These do not indicate that the book is, at times, flawed in its moral judgments. Rather, these contradictions demonstrate that classrooms are ambiguous, charged with moral messages, and open to multiple interpretations. Observations presented by the authors offer numerous examples of different classroom dynamics, illustrating the multiple moral dimensions in teaching. Such divergent understandings of situations are exactly what the authors hope to accomplish as they call on readers to reflect on and analyze the observational accounts they present, with the intention that such observation, questioning, and critique will be transferred to the readers’ teaching practices.

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