

Moral and Character Education in the Israeli Curriculum

Ariel Sarid

Review Abstract

The aim of this review is to organize the knowledge in the field of moral education and to describe the status of moral and character education in the Israeli formal education system. Its purpose is to equip the expert committee appointed by the Ministry of Education with the knowledge needed to mindfully form policy in the realm of moral education. The review is divided into three sections: a) description of the central approaches found in the literature on moral education and discussion of the basic goals, concepts and the skills through which each of the different approaches promotes the development of moral selfhood and personality; b) the state of moral education in various OECD countries, with particular focus on the Israeli formal education system as reflected in Ministry of Education policy papers, moral education programs as well as other relevant resources pertaining directly to the application of moral education; c) indication of points for further reflection on moral education policy in light of the discussion in the previous two sections. The review does not discuss matters concerning application in the field, namely, implementation of moral education policy in school practice.

The review enumerates four central approaches in current moral education literature. The first is the '*moral judgment*' approach, which is based on a modernist Enlightenment view of the autonomous individual according to which the human agent is first and foremost endowed with the capability to reason and act according to universal rational principles. This approach focuses on developing the capacity for universal moral judgment according to developmental stages of moral consciousness.

The second is the '*worthiness*' approach. While this approach can be divided into various (different) sub-sections, what all of them have in common is their critique of the Enlightenment-rationalist view of the autonomous individual. The first sub-section is the *communitarian* approach which perceives the worthy adult as one who adheres to the values of the social group in which he or she has undergone processes of socialization.

The second sub-section, the *feminist* approach, focuses on interpersonal relations based on relations of care and mutual understanding, rather than on judgment.

The third sub-section, *authentic education*, focuses on the authentic expression of each individual's or group's beliefs or preferences within the discussion of moral issues.

In all the above sub-sections comprising the ‘worthiness’ approach, moral education incorporates *concrete content* into the process of moral personal development either on the basis of social membership, gender or individual preferences. This is in contrast to the more formal nature of the moral judgment approach, which calls for ‘bracketing’ issues of personal identity from moral debates and development.

The third approach is the *postmodernist*, which involves exposing, in a critical manner, the power structures and mechanisms oppressing human beings and through this, encouraging individuals to embrace diversity, develop openness to multiple meanings and defiance of conventional, simplistic dichotomies.

The fourth is the *critical* approach, which regards the liberation of the individual as the ultimate goal of the educational process. It seeks to promote more egalitarian learning processes and procedures, increase learners' engagement and participation not only in the learning process but also in making decisions about educational policy. At its core, this approach promotes the critique of culture and heightening awareness of inequalities and offenses to the basic rights of teachers and learners. This, so as to create a more open and egalitarian society in which citizens have greater power in shaping the public, and as a result, also the private spheres.

It is important to point out that the four above approaches are 'ideal generic types'. There are integrative approaches which incorporate (or attempt to reconcile) various components taken from each of the above generic approaches.

In light of the various approaches to moral education described above, the review defines and presents the basic concepts of the field. These concepts are: **autonomy** (including moral judgment and moral motivation), **empathy and care**, **choice**, **self-realization** (or self fulfillment), the development of **authentic identity**, social **critique** and **dialogue**. The above concepts constitute the structural conceptual core of the field of moral education. Views of moral education employ or refer to several of the above concepts and thus the above list should not be regarded as a list of views. However, in light of the discussion of the different approaches to moral education, it is possible to generalize and claim that each of the above approaches takes one of the above basic concepts as a foundation from which all other concepts are derived.

The review seeks to draw attention to the moral crisis characterizing present day (postmodern) societies. It is possible to claim (with caution) that this crisis has spurred governments of OECD countries and their ministries of education to significantly accelerate promotion of moral education programs after a period relatively lacking in programs of this kind during the second half of the 20th century.

The review presents the moral education policies, particularly during the last decade, of three OECD countries (USA, UK and Australia). It shows that these countries have

increased spending and development (as well as the scientific evaluation) of moral education programs at the national level. As seen from official documents, the aim of these programs is to tackle and reverse the affects of the moral laxity that recent studies have indicated. Such is the case in Israel as well. In recent years, the Israeli Ministry of Education has engaged in various initiatives developed to promote moral education in the Israeli school system, including incorporating specially-designated lessons (subject-matter) within the core curriculum.

The review assessed Israeli programs currently being promoted by the Ministry of Education such as "Life Skills", "Maftach Halev" (*The Key to the Heart*, loosely translated), "Israeli Tradition and Culture," a new subject added to the curriculum, as well as field trips to various sites around the country. As in other countries reviewed, the Ministry of Education explicitly refers to the moral laxity of Israeli youth and initiates moral education programs to address the challenge of raising moral behavior by incorporating these programs into the core curriculum. Additionally, the Ministry explicitly seeks to reinforce the Jewish identity of learners and their sense of belonging to Jewish heritage, culture and the Land of Israel.

To conclude, the review shows that moral education programs in Israel and the other countries examined here, primarily focus on instilling rules of proper behavior (violence reduction, tolerance, acceptance of the "other") and mental health (for example, prevention of drug use and substance abuse) or what is commonly termed "life skills" and trying to ensure students internalize them. Generally speaking, most of the moral education programs in Israel apply the "worthiness" approach to moral education (as opposed to the moral judgment approach) and particularly, the communitarian approach through which the education system seeks to instill Jewish-Israeli values, heritage and tradition. Finally, there is general agreement among decision and policy makers concerning the importance of total internalization of values: youngsters should not only learn but also implement or behave in line with the values imparted to them.