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School-based character education tends toward a negative orientation (for example, preventing delinquency). Is there a better way to go—engaging the kinds of moral commitments exemplified by student activists?

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Moral voices of politically engaged urban youth

Ben Kirshner

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN reflection and action is an enduring question for those interested in promoting moral development among young people. Educators have struggled to find effective methods for educating youth to think carefully about moral problems and also show moral commitment in their everyday lives. Some have argued for cognitive approaches, which emphasize reasoning, judgment, and reflection, while others have argued for character-based approaches, which emphasize virtues such as honesty, loyalty, and integrity.[1]

Overlooked in these debates, however, are settings where young people engage in social justice action campaigns to improve their schools and communities. Such groups do not prioritize moral development as their goal. But by giving young people opportunities to combine moral judgment with action, they represent a promising approach to moral education, particularly for urban youth who are troubled by the inequities in their schools or lack of safe opportunities in their neighborhoods.

This chapter highlights the potential of youth activism to influence participants' moral and ethical development. What are the moral concerns that urban youth raise when given the opportunity? How do these concerns get translated into action? I summarize findings from moral development research and their relevance to youth engagement in social action and then draw on original and secondary sources to draw attention to the moral dimensions of social action campaigns organized by youth. This is not an empirical study, but instead an effort to bring attention to the moral perspectives raised by politically engaged youth.

Literature review: From moral reasoning to moral identity

Kohlberg's stages of moral development outlined transitions in children and adolescent's reasoning about moral dilemmas and inspired moral education programs focused on rational deliberation and discussion.[2] He found that young children make judgments primarily in self-interested terms—focusing on fear of punishment or desire for reward—but as they move into adolescence, they develop a greater appreciation for social conventions, such as the importance of maintaining order and respecting laws. Kohlberg also theorized a third level of reasoning, characterized by postconventional judgments based on principles of justice and human rights, but subsequent research found that few adults consistently reasoned this way.[3]

In recent years, approaches to moral education focused on Kohlberg's stages have been criticized on several levels. In addition to feminist and culturally based criticisms of Kohlberg's claim of universal stages, researchers have not been able to demonstrate a clear relationship between moral reasoning and behavior in real-life contexts.[4] Also, proponents of character education have argued that schools should return to an emphasis on a core set of moral virtues that focus on moral behavior and individual development but give less emphasis to discussions about social justice or broader social systems.[5]

Disenchantment with Kohlberg's theory, however, does not mean that educators should abandon the notion that reasoning is a critical feature of moral behavior. Sophisticated moral and political reflection is not limited to philosophers and educated elites; it is in fact central to informed participation in a democracy.[6] But how does reflection get united with action? How are we to think of moral behavior in a holistic way, taking into account a person's judgments, feelings, actions, and habits?

Efforts in this direction have led to the concept of moral identity, described by Hart, Atkins, and Ford as "a commitment consistent with one's sense of self to lines of action that promote or protect the welfare of others."[7] This notion is based on the premise that sustained moral action results only when people conceive of themselves and their goals in moral terms, in other words, when they identify with certain moral standards.[8] For the purposes of this chapter, I conceive of moral identity broadly, to include domains of political and civic participation as well, because they too are concerned with contributing to a broader social good.[9]

The concept of moral identity emphasizes adolescents as active interpreters of their world. Even young children interpret, evaluate, and reflect on messages communicated by parents and society and do not merely internalize external directives.[10] Also, moral identity takes into account the influence of social and cultural context.[11] Social context is especially salient when considering youth in low-income settings who must deal with inadequate resources, a lack of safety, and social prejudices. In their everyday lives, these youth encounter situations that touch on issues of justice, rights, and welfare.[12] It might prove to be productive for young people who are confronted with such problems to reflect on the fairness of such political and social arrangements and to consider strategies for improving the situation.

Research on moral identity formation suggests that adolescents' natural tendency to make meaning about their social surroundings should be the starting point for moral education. Yet many efforts at moral or character education in schools remain fragmented, cobbling

together topics ranging from citizenship to teen sexuality, but with limited effort to draw connections among programs or relate them to students' lives. Furthermore, they often adopt a negative orientation, hoping to prevent delinquency, rather than appealing to students' strengths, hopes, and capacity for moral insight.[13]

Community-based social action projects, however, give youth the opportunity to confront social problems they observe in their everyday lives.[14] Unlike traditional models of community service, wryly dubbed "the lucky helping the needy" by Kahne and Westheimer, social action projects are oriented toward helping one's own community through influencing the deeper causes of problems.[15] Such projects give youth the opportunity to build leadership skills, develop their moral voices, and take action on issues they care about.

Moral voices

Here we look at four examples of moral voices about issues that concerned youth: reducing sexual harassment, creating enriching spaces, combating toxic pollution, and political organizing. The first case is based on my own research. The three others are drawn from analysis of published sources and brochures; I used these sources to examine how youth participants talked about and interpreted the issues that concerned them.

Reducing sexual harassment

The following two quotations reflect concerns raised by teenagers in SLASH (Student Leaders Against Sexual Harassment) about the prevalence of sexual harassment in their school:

> Being a part of SLASH gives me an opportunity to help my community in an issue that I feel strongly about. Often times people see sexual harassment, but they don't do anything about it. . . . I know that SLASH will.

> I joined SLASH because a lot of sexual harassment happens to everybody. It's not a good feeling and it's not a joke.

Although the statements reflect different levels of complexity, the two comments convey a moral standard that sexual harassment is wrong and reflect a sense of obligation to change the situation.

The teenagers in SLASH came together as part of an after-school program in Community Bridges Beacon (CBB), a youth organization in San Francisco's Mission District. Middle school and high school student participants were asked to determine a problem that they wanted to change in their community. After lengthy discussion and debate, the group chose sexual harassment among students as a prevalent problem in their schools. With the assistance of an adult facilitator, the students began a year-long project involving interviews with administrators, surveys of students, and research on district policy.

One CBB staff member described a powerful moment that took place when students talked with adults about the problem of sexual harassment. After hearing the opinion voiced that in essence, "there will always be youth who do such things," the students sought to find explanations of the problem that went beyond attributing blame solely to youth. SLASH eventually chose to investigate situations in which sexual harassment was tolerated in the school system. After examining survey data and school records, the students concluded that schools did not adequately educate youth and teachers about the issue and failed to ensure that existing rules were enforced. By the end of the year, SLASH had succeeded in persuading the San Francisco School Board to pass a resolution calling for a revision in its policies and procedures regarding sexual harassment. The group also sought to create greater awareness about the issue through multiple channels, including a youth conference at a local cultural center and a comic book/manual, *Sexual Harassment Hurts Everyone*, that was distributed to every student in the school district.

Creating enriching spaces

One of the young people growing up in Oakland, California, was quoted in this way in a report written by three teenagers chronicling the lack of opportunities for youth in Oakland:[16]

Here's a place where right is wrong and wrong is right. Every thing is backwards; then they wonder why there's a loss of respect because it was never given. You have to grow up fast just to keep up with our peers. Stepping out of your house is like stepping into another world. No love, not knowing who you can trust, and at any point in time anything can happen and will happen. . . . Elders look at me and think I'm a menace to society, but they do not know I'm doing the best I know how.

In the summer of 1996, a group of youth called Youth of Oakland United (YOU) surveyed two hundred youth about their general concerns. They used their findings to develop proposals for Oakland's City Council. Their report addressed the lack of safe, fun, and constructive places for youth to go after school and during the summer. According to the report, existing teen centers served fewer than two hundred teens each day, which was less than 1 percent of thirty-six thousand teens in Oakland.

The authors raised issues of justice and fairness in comparing the opportunities for youth in Oakland to those in the neighboring towns of Piedmont and Berkeley, saying, "recreation centers in Oakland look bad by comparison." Moreover, the youth centers that were in Oakland did not attract teenagers, for reasons ranging from their unsafe conditions to not engaging adolescent interests and opinions.

As a solution to this lack of opportunities, YOU proposed that Oakland provide funding for youth organizations that would meet the diverse interests and needs of young people. For example, some requested music instruction. Others requested workshops on how to interview for a job or get financial aid for college. Also, reflecting a concern similar to members of SLASH, the participants wanted these places to be safe: "The facilities should have peer conflict mediators to maintain a safe environment by resolving conflicts without violence."[17] Finally, youth felt that they should have a voice in the process of developing such opportunities. With the help of adult organizers and lawyers, the proposals articulated by YOU were drafted into a ballot initiative known as "Kids First" (Measure K), which called for 2.5 percent of the city budget to be directed toward after-school programs for Oakland youth. The ballot was approved in 1996 city elections.

Combating toxic pollution

A participant in a research project undertaken by thirteen year olds living in Richmond, California, asked, "How can they dump toxic chemicals into the bay? It gets into the fish and we get sick because we eat fish."[18] Richmond is an industrial city known for its disproportionate number of oil refineries, waste incinerators, and chemical manufacturers. The participants in this project, who came together under the auspices of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), were Laotian girls whose families had immigrated to the United States. The goal of the project was for the participants to identify features of their local environments that promoted or inhibited their health. They found that several local waterways, including ones fished by Laotian residents for sustenance, were polluted by toxins from local industry.

As a result of their findings, the students made a number of public presentations. At the United Nations Environmental Youth Forum, the students articulated their findings about the lack of natural spaces and nontoxic gathering places in Richmond and made suggestions for what types of environments would be more positive for youth. On a local level, the participants held a community forum at which they explained to families and friends which waterways were polluted and the dangerous consequences of fishing there.

Mobilizing voters

In 2000 members of the Third Eye Movement, a group of politically active young people in California, fought the passage of Proposition 21, designed as a "get tough on crime" policy on juvenile crime. Proposition 21 increased the range of youth cases that could be tried in adult courts and the penalties for juvenile offenses. For example, it treated graffiti and other property damage costing more than four hundred dollars to repair as felonies, thus prosecutable under the "three strikes" mandate.[19]

The stated goal of the ballot initiative was to keep neighborhoods and schools safe. And as shown by members of SLASH, YOU, and APEN, safety was a critical issue for youth. But many young Californians interpreted Proposition 21 as detrimental to their safety and well-being rather than protective of it. For example, they

wrote in a brochure, "Youth are not the enemy. But they treat us like we are. . . . The poverty, poor schools, racism and disrespect for young people in California is not our fault. . . . And now they're trying to pass an initiative to lock us all up and throw away the key, saying it'll make us safer. " Media reports documented the unexpected grassroots organizing among youth opposed to the initiative across the state.[20]

Youth activists offered several objections, including fears of being wrongfully targeted by police and criticism of the notion that a juvenile mistake should lead to an adult prison sentence. Also, some objected to what they perceived to be a hypocritical stance taken by policymakers, which blamed youth for society's problems but allocated few resources for improving their lives. They wondered why money was spent on a costly initiative when there did not seem to be enough money for public schools. As one youth opposed to the measure explained:

> Walk into your school. . . .You'll see chipped paint. Wanna go to the bathroom? There's no toilet paper, no soap, no towels to wipe your hands on. Go up to your classroom. You have no books, or your books are limited to classroom use, or the books that are in the classroom are falling apart and the teacher says, "Here's a piece of tape so you can tape 'em up." Walk into another classroom and the teacher tells you to watch over your head because the ceiling is falling down and it won't be repaired for two weeks.[21]

By focusing on the failings of many inner-city public schools, the student activists framed the proposition as a social justice issue.

Opposition to Proposition 21 illustrates the finding from moral identity research that young people actively interpret policies and adult directives rather than just internalize them. Evidently young people had quite different conceptions of what it would take to ensure safety and well-being. Whereas policymakers sought to ensure safety through zero tolerance, youthful opponents argued that safety would be ensured through improved schools and community centers.

Who shapes the moral agenda for youth?

Writing in the 1960s, Erik Erikson suggested that criticism and renewal comprise a central task of adolescence: "In youth the tables of childhood dependence begin slowly to turn: no longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life. It is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented to them has some vital promise, and it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm those who confirm them, to renew and regenerate, to disavow what is rotten, to reform and rebel."[22]

This chapter has highlighted four social action campaigns in which youth activists combine critical reasoning with moral action. Participants wrestled with essential moral notions of justice, rights, and welfare as they sought solutions to pressing problems. Student leaders in the Mission District of San Francisco found that large numbers of their peers felt vulnerable and unsafe in school; they asked school administrators to handle sexual harassment more forcefully and to promote education about the issue. Young women in Richmond appealed to notions of environmental justice; they asked why it was that they must live in a toxic area and sought healthy alternatives for their community. Youth in Oakland declared their rights to be safe, have fun, and develop career opportunities; they argued that it was unfair that youth in nearby towns had a greater number of such opportunities. Political activists across California questioned the moral integrity of a proposal to expand the reach of the criminal justice system into the lives of youth when large numbers of urban public schools were deteriorating.

Caveats

Although the youth quoted in this chapter reflect their concerns about social justice, this analysis is not meant to suggest that all young people share these views. Other research has shown that some youth blame themselves or their peers for problems they experience in their schools.[23] Also, this analysis did not attempt to identify the impact of participation on youth's moral development

or evaluate different levels of reasoning. The understanding of some young people of these social issues may have been complex and nuanced, while that of others may have been more superficial.

Nevertheless, the examples underscore the potential of social action for the moral and civic development of youth and suggest directions for further research. For example, future studies might look into the conditions in which it is developmentally adaptive for youth living in distressed neighborhoods to reason critically about their social and political circumstances, especially when this reasoning is connected to action.

Implications for civic engagement

Some readers might interpret these four case studies as examples of a culture of oppositional youth who are angry at mainstream institutions and reject their norms and values. But this interpretation is not merited when one considers the desires and goals that motivated these projects. Certain themes were common: a desire for safe places, fun things to do, better educational opportunities, and clean neighborhoods. Far from radical or extreme, their demands reflect a basic wish to grow up in a healthy environment.

The examples also reflect youths' desire to participate in a larger world of civic institutions and democratic decision-making. In all four cases, youth brought their concerns to a wider, public platform. SLASH and YOU succeeded in persuading adults to pass resolutions that led to meaningful policy changes. Although Proposition 21 was eventually passed, opposition efforts mobilized a network of youth organizations for future civic engagement. Many of the youth talked about this being the first time they had a sense of their own power, especially in relation to political structures. For example, one of the youth fighting Proposition 21 said, "We're gonna get some new families into politics, instead of just the Kennedys, the Bushes, the Franklins, the Washingtons—the Manigos, the Ossorios!"[24]

The profiles discussed here underscore the value of community-based organizations. Such organizations are not always viewed as sites for moral education, perhaps because they rarely use the language of moral or character education to describe their goals. But they have great potential to support youth's burgeoning moral and political identities.[25] Flanagan and Faison write that such organizations offer "young people opportunities to explore what it means to be a member of 'the public', and to work out the reciprocity between rights and obligations in the meaning of citizenship."[26] Through engaged participation, urban youth take on responsible leadership roles and articulate their own questions and concerns about the larger democracy of which they are a part.

Conclusion

Youth activism represents a promising synthesis of two broad goals in moral education: the development of moral judgments about the social and political world and the ability to implement one's principles in action. Among working-class and poor youth, such commitments often take place in a context where inequities in resources, opportunities, and safety are salient, and thus discussions about justice, rights, and welfare are central features of moral and political identity development. Studying how youth assess and transform their local environments represents a promising direction for understanding moral development among adolescents in diverse social contexts. While some might regret that young people must fight for clean parks and safe schools, such struggles contribute to youth's moral development as well as the renewal of local communities and schools.

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