

Ethical Literacy for Today's Schools

PAULA MIRK

AS TRUSTEES, SHOULD WE FIND A NEW HEAD OF school, or give this one more time and encouragement to improve performance? As a school head, should I apply the same discipline for this student as I would for any other, or should I take into account circumstances that might warrant making an exception? As a classroom teacher, how can I balance the extra time one of my students needs, with the fast pace that keeps the rest of my students attentive and interested? As a student, should I choose to report the dangerous behavior of my friend, even though I swore myself to secrecy?

Really tough ethical dilemmas come about when core values conflict. The task of determining the “higher right” can be daunting. How can we respect short term needs that seem pitted against other, longer term responsibilities? Does fairness always trump compassion, or are there times when it's more ethical to bend the rules? How can I balance my responsibilities to an individual if they conflict with the needs of a larger group? When does my regard for the truth outweigh my responsibility to confidentiality? Everyone in a school community is faced at times with this kind of values-based decision making. So everyone can benefit from paying attention to ethics as both an urgent literacy requirement for our students, and as a unifying force in developing positive school culture.

Both those reasons lay behind the founding of The Institute for Global Ethics (IGE), an international, non partisan and non sectarian charity with offices in Canada, England and the U.S. IGE's president, Rushworth M. Kidder, learned about the urgency of this issue as one of the first Western journalists to cover the Chernobyl reactor disaster. He was deeply alarmed that, as he says, “before there was a nuclear meltdown, there had been a moral meltdown.”

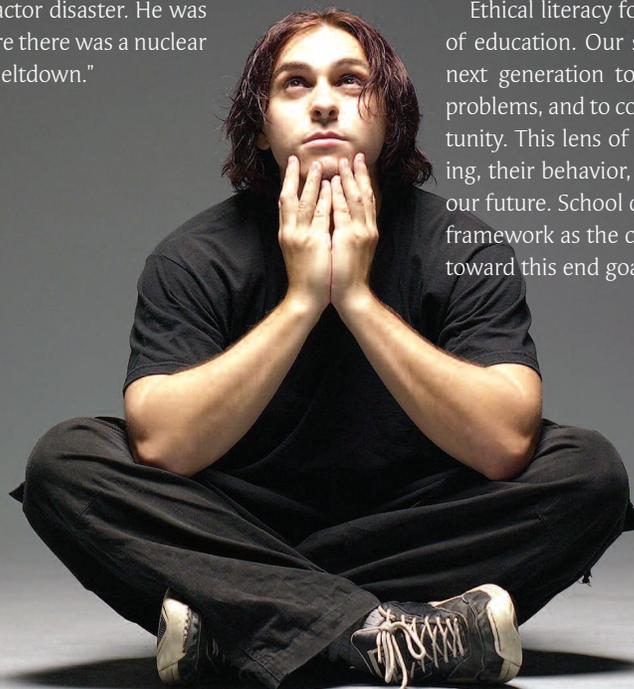
“Scientists in charge of the reactor could have avoided that calamity,” he explains. “Nowadays, our technology is leveraging our ethics as never before in history. You may have highly educated people in charge of these large-scale systems, but without the lens of ethics in place, without attention to ethics, you're looking at, potentially, some world-class disasters.”

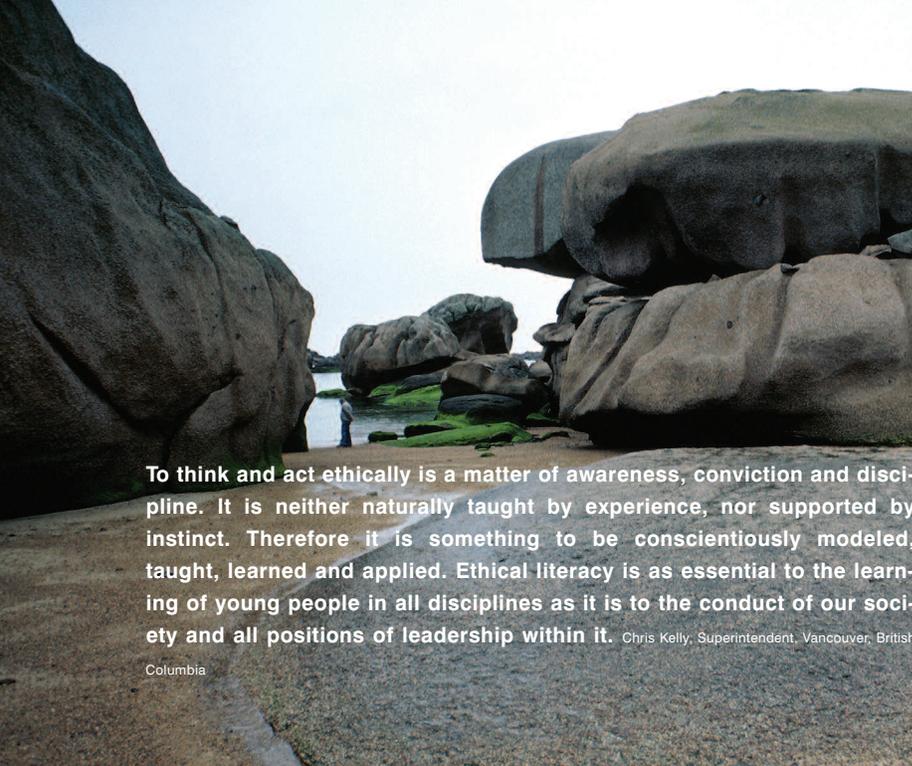
DOES FAIRNESS ALWAYS TRUMP COMPASSION, OR ARE THERE TIMES WHEN IT'S MORE ETHICAL TO BEND THE RULES?

Around the same time, benefits to a values and ethics focus were confirmed for Kidder when he interviewed 26 thought leaders from 16 countries for his book, *Shared Values for a Troubled World*. Exploring this variety of perspectives on our future, he found one compelling theme common to all: the need for a more sophisticated awareness, appreciation and skill level regarding ethics, especially in the leadership of organizations.¹

“Worldwide, thoughtful people were talking about some common ideas – some core principles that we share as human beings,” he says. “Our Institute has been testing and confirming those ideas ever since.” What began as a conceptual framework for determining the core, shared values of a group and for addressing their ethical dilemmas has evolved into a dimension of learning that most educators now recognize as imperative. We call this new dimension – which is actually as old as Socrates and Aristotle – “ethical literacy.”

Ethical literacy forms the bedrock for the broadest aims of education. Our survival may depend on educating the next generation to reason morally whenever they solve problems, and to consider the greater good at every opportunity. This lens of ethics always accompanies their thinking, their behavior, and their perspective of the world and our future. School communities are using IGE's conceptual framework as the centerpiece for system wide approaches toward this end goal of ethical literacy.





To think and act ethically is a matter of awareness, conviction and discipline. It is neither naturally taught by experience, nor supported by instinct. Therefore it is something to be conscientiously modeled, taught, learned and applied. Ethical literacy is as essential to the learning of young people in all disciplines as it is to the conduct of our society and all positions of leadership within it. Chris Kelly, Superintendent, Vancouver, British Columbia

Columbia

DEVELOPING ETHICAL LITERACY

How do we go about developing ethical literacy in our young people? The most effective way is to create a culture of clear, positive learning environments grounded in shared ethical values, not just a set of rules or policies. Everyone can feel a part of this kind of culture, if given the opportunity to agree on some basic operating principles. In contexts as different as Bangladesh, El Salvador, Canada and Japan, the Institute for Global Ethics has tested the premise that most of us can agree on some core, common values. With few exceptions, IGE finds generally the same set of values across age groups, gender, religion, race and nationality:

- Honesty
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Fairness
- Compassion.

ETHICAL LITERACY FORMS THE BEDROCK FOR THE BROADEST AIMS OF EDUCATION.

When these values become the centerpiece for school culture, they come across in the way adults and young people interact, talk, and make decisions on a daily basis. The common language of ethics radiates from the Superintendent and Board of Trustees, down to the level of the classroom, and even to the way parents and children consider issues at home. Increasingly, schools and school systems across the U.S. the U.K., Canada and parts of Latin America are proactively developing ethical school cultures by providing opportunities for all adults and young people to learn and practice ethical decision making. In highly interactive small group activities, Global Ethics facilitators introduce audiences to a conceptual framework that can be applied to trustee discussions, to faculty meetings, to classrooms, and to dinner table talk. This Ethical Fitness® approach includes:

- **Ethical Awareness:** This develops the ability to identify ethical issues in personal life, in school, in current events. What is the relationship between freedom and choice?

In what areas of modern life are we still upholding the “unenforceable,” as opposed to the law? Is it important to preserve our opportunities to self-regulate rather than to be regulated? Do ethical relativism and ethical absolutism play a part in explaining the increasingly litigious trends in society? In what ways does technology leverage our need for ethics? In what ways does it enhance our ability to coexist and to thrive? Is our “moral barometer” rising or falling? Through these and other questions, adults and young people begin to understand that ethical issues are omnipresent, serious, and relevant.

- **Operationalized Values:** The core values we find common to most groups build the case for ethics as universal and germane to being human. Often our most pressing challenge however, is to find ways to uphold this implicit societal compact in daily interactions. What do these core values look like in practice? How can they be used as the foundation for stronger leadership, smoother relationships, better academic performance, and a deeper commitment to local and global communities?
- **Right vs. Right:** Someone once said, “If ethics were easy, only a fool would be unethical.” Key to IGE’s process is grappling with how core values often conflict with each other, and recognizing that ethics isn’t as simple as, “Always obey your values.” What happens when one core value pulls you one way, while another pulls you in a different direction? Practice in thinking through and articulating right vs. right decisions is essential to building trust in an organization. If everyone is well versed in the same core values and familiar with the complex ways these values can conflict, they are more likely to trust leadership decisions.
- **Moral Courage:** Does *knowing* what’s right automatically ensure *doing* what’s right? What internal strengths give us the courage to act on our beliefs? What conditions help us, and what factors work against us? Moral courage takes our understanding about values and ethical decision making into the realm of action.

LEADERSHIP TOWARD VALUES-BASED CULTURES

Where is the best starting point for this imperative kind of school change? Michael Fullan, Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, points the way in his 2003 book *The Moral Imperative of Leadership*. “Leading schools,” he writes, “requires principals with the courage and capacity to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action.”² His insight underscores a fact well known in the business world, that the ethics of the CEO has a direct influence on employee behavior. If school trustees, superintendents, principals, teachers and parents are equipped to be thoughtful and deliberate about “doing the right thing”, students will learn to follow suit. (Editor’s note: for a review of Michael Fullan’s book *The Moral Imperative of Leadership*, see page 39.)

“We are seeking ... an ethical culture within our education system that seeks and develops principled leadership” states the British Columbia School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) web site, describing their current *Ethics Education Initiative*. “To that end we need to build an ethically fit leadership cohort in public education that will

assist our school boards, principals, teachers and students. All that we do in this regard ultimately affects the development, achievements and lives of our students."

Since beginning their work in April, 2001, BCSSA has trained scores of superintendents and others in leadership to carry the message forward about the need for promoting ethical literacy from the top down. "We estimate that over the past few years, we have had almost two thousand people – teachers, principals, superintendents, parents, trustees and students – attend ethics presentations," explains Wendy Lee, Executive Director of BCSSA. "Ethics is the fly-wheel that keeps us focused on the main thing: defining and promoting all achievements for all students. It permeates everything we do. The BCSSA Statement of Beliefs and Dimensions of Practice – the two foundation documents, combined with our Code of Ethics – grounds our work."

Similarly, in 1999, the state of Maine in the U.S. used public law to launch a statewide approach to developing ethical literacy:

In consultation with organizations representing school boards, school administrators, teachers, parents and other interested local officials and community members, the commissioner shall develop statewide standards for responsible and ethical student behavior. *Enacted Public Law 1999, Chapter 351*

As the mandate implies, Maine's Commission on Ethical and Responsible Student Behavior was comprised of stakeholders from across the state – parents, administrators, teachers and students. Careful to leave plenty of room for each district to identify its own needs and to develop its own approach, the Commission left no room for doubt about the urgency of ethics as a dimension of learning. In the final report, *Taking Responsibility* distributed to all of Maine's school communities, Duke Albanese, who led this initiative as Commissioner of Education, writes: "Now, communities across the state should work in earnest to mobilize their educators, school staff, students, parents and citizens to adapt and implement these standards. The culture and climate of schools can begin to change immediately, if all involved make this commitment."

For educational leaders, this commitment to transforming our schools into more ethical places to learn, and to prioritizing ethical literacy as a crucial outcome for all students, is likely to demand at least a measure of moral courage. Consider these common school issues:

EN BREF Des dilemmes éthiques surviennent lorsqu'il y a conflit dans les valeurs de base. L'Institute for Global Ethics a été fondé pour promouvoir l'éthique en tant que l'une des exigences cruciales de littératie pour les élèves et aussi en tant que force unificatrice pour susciter une culture scolaire positive. Le cadre conceptuel que prône l'Institut peut être appliqué à divers contextes : une discussion de conseillers scolaires, une réunion de professeurs, un cours en salle de classe ou une discussion à table entre plusieurs convives. Il a été mis en pratique par des conseils scolaires au Canada et aux États-Unis. Afin de transformer nos écoles en des milieux axés sur des valeurs éthiques communes, les leaders scolaires devront faire preuve d'intégrité et de courage moral, mais comme le souligne Duke Albanese, celui qui a dirigé la Commission de l'état du Maine sur le comportement éthique et responsable des élèves : « Ce n'est pas assez de produire des jeunes qui soient intelligents. Il faut aussi qu'ils soient bons. »

- Staff who place their own needs ahead of students' needs
- School trustees afraid that an ethical choice could lead to a legal nightmare
- Parents who insist that their kids deserve more than other kids
- Community members who feel that "modern education" costs too much (and the "old school" was good enough for them).

School leaders will need the integrity and critical thinking ability to work through tough issues and to articulate their positions successfully. But we ignore the urgent need for ethical literacy at our peril. As Maine's Duke Albanese explains, an emphasis on school reform and improvement must balance academic literacy with ethical literacy. In his words, "...it isn't enough to develop smart kids – it's just as important to develop *good* kids." |

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Notes

- 1 See also Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage* (William Morrow, 2005).
- 2 Michael Fullan, *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership* (Toronto: Corwin Press, 2003), 45.

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