

HABITS OF MIND
Struggling Over Values
In America's Classrooms
By Melinda Fine
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By Amital Etzioni

THIS remarkable book provides an intriguing account of what moral education looks like in the trenches. It is the story of a program called "Facing History and Ourselves" (FHAO), which teaches school children about the Holocaust—and much more. The course program aims to make students aware of the evils of intolerance and violence. It was designed by a group of middle-school teachers in 1976. Some 30,000 educators are said to have been trained in the use of FHAO, and half a million students are reportedly exposed to it each year.

The book describes the ways youngsters reacted to FHAO in one middle-school classroom, in one town, Cambridge, Mass. While at first it would seem that examining a class in this one town would sharply limit the significance of this case study, it turns out that the book covers all the issues involved in teaching values, and then some. Melinda Fine, armed with a doctorate from the Harvard School of Education, has a keen eye and powerful pen. The first 84 pages of her book describe, in a spellbinding fashion, what happened in that classroom during one semester. You can feel the racial, ethnic and religious tensions among the youngsters as they engage in classroom discussion from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. You get an earful of prejudice and ignorance, for example, when one child confides that he believes

that there is an international Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world. And you can cheer the occasions when someone re-examines their resentments toward those from different social backgrounds.

The rest of the book is devoted to putting the narrative into broader contexts: depicting the battles the program caused nationally after it was attacked by the New Right on the grounds that FHAO was deliberately trying to change the morals, religious beliefs and political attitudes of students; providing a historical overview of other attempts at moral education; and giving a repetitive commentary on the author's views of the deeper meanings of the program. It is here that the problems with this book begin.

Fine and the authors of FHAO argue that the program is an appropriate tool for values education in public schools because far from promoting a particular set of values, it teaches tolerance for differences, advances critical thinking, sensitizes pupils to moral values and helps them to better understand themselves. Readers who do not regularly follow these matters may not realize that these goals reflect a particular social and educational philosophy, namely, a liberal one.

The underlying assumption, as articulated by Harvard philosopher John Rawls and Oxford philosopher Ronald Dworkin, is that societies should neither formulate nor transmit to the younger generation any specific concept of the common good or a set of virtues, but allow each person to decide what they consider to be of value. Hence the emphasis in FHAO on diversity but not on shared bonds and values, on "sensitizing" students to values

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but not fostering their commitment to any one code, and so on. Critics of liberal philosophy argue that such a neutral approach (also reflected in a method popular in the '70s and '80s called "values clarification" in which students were asked to discover which values they already had) prevents society from establishing a much needed moral foundation—and is relativistic to boot.

In FHAO, students are repeatedly drilled to accept that America is a diverse, pluralistic society that does not adhere to a set of core values other than procedural ones (we vote as a way to resolve differences, for instance). The curriculum depicts democracy not as having a set value in itself, but as a vehicle through which any set of values could be debated and voted up or down. Little wonder that the New Right argued that the program subverts the view that there is a superior set of American core values. If one scraps the rhetorical overkill, this seems to me a fair challenge.

Actually, under the guise of neutrality, FHAO (and Fine) has a rather specific normative agenda. At the beginning of the semester the teacher reviewed the ground rules for discussion. "First, there will be no putdowns of other people . . . Second, I want you to try to avoid making judgments about other people's ideas and beliefs. Third, we are going to have several guests representing various viewpoints, for balance."

The reader of *Habits of Mind*, however, will have little doubt that the curriculum does promote a rather specific set of values, while claiming merely to be tolerant and open. Case in point: One of the first lessons involved a short film about a boy who goes hunting for the first time with his macho dad. His mother, warmly depicted, objects to the guns and killing of innocent animals. The boy is disgusted by the sight of rabbits being blown into bits but feels drawn to his father. Are any particular values transmitted here? No way, says Fine. This is just an opportunity for those who identify with the boy to sort out their feelings about the evils of guns, hunting and macho fathers. If this is neutral.

Fine herself writes at one point: "The curriculum does not intend to suggest that all perspectives and beliefs are equally valid. . . [the teacher's] comment about 'not judging others' notwithstanding. Instead, the program seeks to help students recognize that their beliefs are, in part, culturally determined; to understand that these beliefs are linked to power relations within any given society."

This is not a slip of the pen. One of the units of the program about the Holocaust is introduced by a quote from a book by the radical community organizer Saul

Alinsky. You may be enthusiastic about teaching 12- and 13-year-olds about power relations in America or troubled by it, but neutral about American society it is not.

Also true is the charge that the program is manipulative, if one means that it seeks to affect emotions and values rather than merely to impart knowledge. FHAO is effectively designed from this viewpoint: It draws on high-power, affect-laden narratives, films and first-person accounts. As Fine documents, it reaches deep into the students' emotions. As values contain a strong emotional component, they too are reshaped in the process.

But as in other areas, the New Right's criticisms are much more telling than its solutions. While FHAO has its faults, removing all values education from public schools and limiting these schools strictly to imparting cognitive skills and knowledge in the narrow sense of this term cannot be accomplished and should not be tried. Teaching history, literature, social studies, geography and civics imparts values. There is no neutral way to talk about the bombing of Hiroshima (as the battle at the Smithsonian recently showed), the history of Native Americans, or Columbus "discovering" America, or most any other topic. A school can choose between inadvertent values education or a carefully crafted program, but there is no way around values education.

And it is just as well. Families need schools to reinforce and supplement the values education they have launched, and for the schools to step in by default where families fail or when there is no family. There is, though, a way to teach values that doesn't press liberal or leftist or right-wing opinions. We can teach those values we all share. On examination these are more numerous than we think. We often do not realize this because we are distracted by the few dramatic issues where values divide us, such as abortion and homosexuality. But we all believe that under most circumstances truth telling is morally more appropriate than lying; that we should treat all people with dignity; that children should not have children; that we should not be strung out on drugs or alcohol; and much more. We need programs that focus on these values. The fact that FHAO is too one-sided to qualify shows only that forming a program of shared values is a tall order. . . not that it cannot be done. ■

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