

MORAL/VALUES EDUCATION

Don Cochrane and Dan Williams studied moral/values education, concerning themselves not only with curriculum, but also policy, mandates, teacher preparation, and pilot projects as well.¹ They found a “disconnect between the professed (albeit limited) commitments to teaching moral/values education from official ministry documents and ... curricular documents and accompanying teachers’ resources.”² Here’s how they came to this conclusion.

Cochrane and Williams start by defining “policy,” a term they use “to apply to any statement or directive intended to provide on-going sanction, either positive or negative, for institutional practice,” including “curriculum guidelines and textbook selection criteria” as well as any “statements, directives, guidelines, or regulations” that “legitimize institutional action or inaction,”³ a broad definition indeed. Conscious that “curriculum policy statements and school practice” often enjoy a “tenuous” relationship, nonetheless “relevant curricular and administrative literature provides evidence at least of what is permitted, encouraged, prescribed, or prohibited.”⁴ And so Cochrane and Williams turn to “the climate of official opinion concerning values instruction and the level of awareness of literature and resources in moral education possessed by our provincial ministries.”⁵ They surveyed curriculum directors of provincial ministries of education and the documents supplied them by the ministries, these supplemented by “curriculum documents, research reports, journal articles, and evidence from non-ministry contacts.”⁶

What did they discover? While there were policy statements in Ontario and Nova Scotia “which deal exclusively with values and moral education ... those of other provinces ... only make brief reference to values or moral education in the context of general curriculum statements or guidelines.”⁷ In Saskatchewan, Cochrane and Williams found there “no *general* policy or guidelines for values/moral education, although specific course outlines contain ‘objectives dealing with values’.”⁸ They cite Saskatchewan ministry’s “senior secondary school curriculum guides for a three-year program in Christian Ethics aimed at the ‘Christian actualization’ of students,” while “various social studies guides make brief reference to values as cultural phenomena to be studied from a social science point of view.”⁹

Other ministries of education, however, published curriculum guides that showed “little or no relationship to official values/moral education policy,” and in fact contained “no specific references to values to be taught, or moral development and evaluative reasoning objectives or activities, or even controversial issues.”¹⁰ Several provinces – Cochrane and Williams list Alberta, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan - do publish “social studies, language arts, or counselling curriculum guides that make reference to clarifying personal and social values,” and one province (British Columbia) allows for “discussion of value questions”; Saskatchewan and New

Brunswick promote “evaluative reasoning.”¹¹ Cochrane and Williams judge these references “superficial and devoid of content and examples.”¹² Only Ontario, Quebec, and Saskatchewan provided teacher guides for “curricula of specifically moral/ethical character.”¹³ In Quebec’s Protestant School guides, as well as in those aforementioned Saskatchewan guides, “moral education is not clearly differentiated from religious instruction.”¹⁴ Ontario, Saskatchewan, Quebec, Alberta, Manitoba, and New Brunswick “list ... student resource materials for some form of values/moral education,” while British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia “either provide no such materials or provide materials which do not reflect a coherent values/moral education approach.”¹⁵

Cochrane and Williams report that “Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario list student materials embodying approaches to values/moral education” but they do “not guarantee they will actually be available in schools,” as materials must be “purchased by school boards and may or may not be ordered by schools from among the many titles listed in provincial resource manuals.”¹⁶ In Alberta, Cochrane and Williams found that listed materials - *Resource Materials for Elementary Social Studies* that include the DUSO (Developing Understanding Self and Others) kits and Guidance Associates' *First Things: Values* - exhibited “markedly different conceptions of values/moral education, some of which may not even be consistent with official policy.”¹⁷ In fact, they found that no provincial ministry or school authority (excepting New Brunswick) provided “pupil resource materials specifically designed for or adapted to the values/moral education approach advocated in that jurisdiction.”¹⁸ They single out New Brunswick’s policy: it “advocates clarification of personal and social values as a major objective of social studies education,” and even provides a textbook - *Making Value Judgements* – for junior high school social studies students.¹⁹ Accompanied by a “matching teacher guide,” the textbook represents the “one instance ... [of] evidence of consistency between policy and implementation.”²⁰

Nova Scotia and Manitoba “exclude sexist, ethnic, racial, and religious bias” in curriculum materials; British Columbia excludes sexist materials.²¹ Overall, however, Cochrane and Williams found that the provinces “lack criteria that either mandate or forbid consideration of sexist or racist issues from a moral viewpoint (or in any other normative way),” nor does any province “ensure inclusion of moral consideration of controversial issues,” although Manitoba does make a general statement concerning ‘a public duty to inject into our educational system positive influences which will help create sensitivity to basic human rights and feelings’.”²² Moreover, the “materials selection criteria that we examined fail to implement or promote existing ministry of education values/moral education policy.”²³

Cochrane and Williams also found that ministries of education exhibit less interest in assessing the “impact of values/moral education programs and policies on schools and students than they are in provincial assessment or monitoring in other curriculum areas.”²⁴ Five of the nine provinces - New Brunswick, Quebec,

Newfoundland, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia - reported “no evidence” their ministries assessed “program effectiveness”; in fact, ministry officials didn’t even seem curious to learn if their policies were implemented.²⁵ Perhaps, Cochrane and Williams speculate, these lapses were due to “confusion and inconsistency within and among Canadian educational jurisdictions concerning the nature of and so the justification of values/ moral education.”²⁶ They conclude:

We suspect that success or failure in publicly supported school enterprises in values and moral education is related to the presence or absence of several factors: a clear conception of the endeavor; awareness of the relevant literature and theory; policy that legitimizes the activity; a strong, sympathetic minister or ministry of education; resources for teacher training; and a secure link among university, field personnel, and ministry. Ontario is the only province that possesses all of these attributes to some degree at least. By contrast, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island appear to lack every single one.²⁷

Thus concludes a damning report on the state of values/moral education in Canada.

COMMENTARY

The research assistant who read this article - Anton Birioukov-Brant – found the “methodology of this study ... [to be] troubled, as documents were procured through contact with curricular directors of each province,” meaning that “certain documents may have been missed due to the inclusionary criteria set by each director of curriculum.” Even so, clearly, as Anton also noted in his commentary, there was “a disconnect between the official ministry position on moral/values education and what is espoused within the curricular and teaching materials provided to the teachers.” The findings suggest, Anton concludes, “lack of direction and fear of upsetting the status quo,” the two possibly (it occurs to me) reciprocally related.

That curriculum reform can amount to “window dressing” is no cynical suspicion but, in my reading over the years, has often been the case, especially but not only in the United States. Even when sincere, curriculum reforms often flounder (are “recontextualized” some curriculum specialists say) at the local level, especially when directed from ministries of education or, in the case of the United States, politicians. (No Child Left Behind might be the most notorious example.) In research briefs #53 and #59 we reviewed efforts that placed teachers at the centre of such efforts, in part to ensure fidelity between curriculum revision and practice. Even teacher-centred curriculum reform cannot ensure students will study (let alone learn) what they are

directed to study and learn. That fact does not illegitimate the effort, but it does leave me disinclined to generalize about curriculum reform. My preference has been that it be teacher-centred – in consultation with colleagues, students, curriculum experts, and possibly parents – but I would not rule out reform being formulated at and mandated from the top. In certain circumstances, top-down reform might well be necessary. The situation Cochrane and Williams describe may have been one of those.

REFERENCE

Cochrane, Don and Williams, David. 1978. The Stances of Provincial Ministries of Education towards Values/Moral Education in Public Schools. *Canadian Journal of Education* 3 (4), 1-14.

ENDNOTES

¹ The quoted passage – indeed, this entire opening paragraph – is taken from Anton Birioukov-Brant’s abstract of the article.

² Ibid.

³ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 1-2.

⁴ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 2.

⁵ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 2.

⁶ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 2.

⁷ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 3. A table on page 4 outlines those provinces that had moral/values education incorporated in their curricula.

⁸ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 5.

⁹ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 5.

¹⁰ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 6. Nova Scotia and Newfoundland provided “no specific-subject teacher guides to help teachers apply general provincial policy in values/moral education” (Ibid.).

¹¹ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 6.

¹² Cochrane and Williams 1978, 6.

¹³ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 6.

¹⁴ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 6.

¹⁵ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 6.

¹⁶ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 6-7.

¹⁷ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 7.

¹⁸ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 7.

-
- ¹⁹ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 7. The textbook, Cochrane and Williams report, was “an application and elaboration of the Raths, Harmon, and Simon’s ‘values clarification’ approach” (Ibid.). see <https://louisraths.wordpress.com/values-clarification-2/> Accessed February 7, 2021.
- ²⁰ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 7.
- ²¹ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 7.
- ²² Cochrane and Williams 1978, 7.
- ²³ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 7.
- ²⁴ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 9.
- ²⁵ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 9.
- ²⁶ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 10.
- ²⁷ Cochrane and Williams 1978, 12-13.