

BOOK REVIEWS

MORAL EDUCATION IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS: THE CONTINUING CHALLENGE

THOMAS HUNT & MONALISA MCCURRY MULLINS
 INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, 2005
 \$34.95, 256 pages

Reviewed by Timothy Walch

There is a popular children's song called "School Days" that defines school as the place where children learn the three Rs – readin', ritin', and 'rithmetic. No one has ever objected to the lyric because it has always been common wisdom that the purpose of the school was to prepare young people for the world.

But literacy and math were only part of the story. Most Americans wanted schools to teach more than working skills; they hoped that school would instill proper moral values and beliefs in all children – their neighbors' children as well as their own. It was that fourth R, what many called religion, that has complicated American education for more than 150 years.

Hunt and Mullins of the University of Dayton refer to this dilemma as a "continuing challenge." In fact, their new book, *Moral Education in America's Schools*, uses that phrase as its subtitle. It seems that most Americans can agree that they want value-based education; they just cannot agree on the definition of those values and how they should be taught.

Hunt and Mullins have prepared a well-written, sharply articulated survey of the dilemma. They are modest in their claim that their book is no more than "an episodic history that deals with selected periods, movements, and individuals throughout the course of American educational history from the time of colonial Massachusetts in the 17th century up to present times" (pp. x-xi). The book is more than the sum of its chapters, however. *Moral Education in America's Schools* challenges readers to rethink their personal positions on the matter of moral education.

The book begins with a preface that articulates the strong and continuing interest of the American people in moral education. Year after year,

Gallup surveys have revealed that parents are less concerned with literacy and vocational skills than they are with student behavior. It seems that Americans have fixated on lack of discipline as the most serious problem in our schools today. The past seems to be prologue in the matter of moral education.

In 17 brief chapters, Hunt and Mullins trace the contours of this quest for behavior modification through moral instruction. In the years before the establishment of public education, there was a consensus that parents, with the assistance of educators, would have primary responsibility for teaching children good habits. Such habits would be vital not only for success in this world, but also to achieve salvation in the next. Hunt and Mullins show how this principle was the thread that tied together a range of models from early colonial instruction through the Lancaster method to the common school crusade of Horace Mann.

As Hunt and Mullins show, Mann and his colleagues promised too much and too little at the same time. It was too much because common school advocates promised daily moral instruction based on the King James Bible; this alienated Catholics who perceived this plan to be little more than an effort to spirit their children away from the Church. It was too little because there was no clear evidence that biblical instruction would be sufficient to change behavior.

Over the next century, public educators muddled over how to mold student behavior and values without the use of religious doctrine. The King James Bible was abandoned as a classroom resource, but values were implicit in all of the texts, most particularly *McGuffey's Readers*. The authors also summarize the work of the Educational Policies Commission (EPC; 1935-1968) which sought ways to nurture value-based education outside the context of Christian moral instruction.

In spite of the efforts of the EPC, prayer and Bible reading remained a vital part of public education in many school districts until the 1960s. The notorious *Shemp* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court put an end to prayer in the schools and forced educators to look elsewhere for ways to influence the moral development of their children.

Hunt and Mullins show well how educators have struggled with moral education since the *Shemp* decision. They discuss the work of Kohlberg, the values clarification program of the 1970s and 1980s, and the character education movement that has become so popular in the last decade. None of these efforts has completely satisfied parents and educators.

The authors neatly capture the dilemma of moral education in a quote at the end of the book. "The fact that we value pluralism in our society," they write, "does not preclude the likelihood that there are certain core values that

are relatively common to most of us” (p. 187). There is no questioning the truth of that statement. But as Hunt and Mullins show so well, the devil – and the angel – are in the details.

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BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: THE LIMINAL IMAGINATION, EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

JAMES C. CONROY

PETER LANG, 2004

\$32.95, 217 pages

Reviewed by Edward J. Caron

In *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education and Democracy*, James C. Conroy argues that the forces of consumerism and globalization have come to characterize our conception of what it means to live in a democratic society. Conroy offers an argument, steered by discussions of unique metaphors, that empowers public schools to confront this parochial interpretation of democracy and embrace new notions of what it means to lead the good life in the good society. Conroy succeeds in raising important questions about the dangerous consequences inherent in the maintenance of an economically functionalist orientation to schooling; however, the author ultimately falls short in presenting a compelling case for the implementation of his metaphors in a classroom setting.

Conroy believes the values of late-industrial liberal democracies are inextricably tied to the values of the marketplace. This economic interpretation of democracy, manifested in the political, cultural, social, and, most notably, educational spaces in our society, serves to invalidate alternative perspectives “that might be judged controversial or damaging to social and