



College of Education

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In Pursuit of Good Life: High School Students' Constructions of Morality and the Implications for Educational Leadership

Inner-city schools are believed to experience widespread poverty and racism. While leaders in these schools espouse equality, studies reveal academic inequality among minority students. By recognizing these students' academic and nonacademic needs and achievements, school leaders can engage them in the appreciation of morality and empowerment of the community. To probe the connections between public schooling and high school students' morality and perceived future, UIUC researcher Luis Mirón, with colleagues Ira Bogotch and Gert Biesta, conducted a qualitative study of 23 students from two inner-city schools: City High School (CHS), a magnet school with a strong African American tradition of racial-ethnic pride, and the more conventional Neighborhood High School (NHS), where considerable lack of trust and respect undermines moral equality.

Information gathered through interviews included a description of school life, grade importance, career goals, curriculum relevance, classroom and home behavior, teachers' and administrators' relationships, student dislikes, school business partnerships, and student and society values. All of the students interviewed at CHS were African American, with 90% so at NHS. Interview data were analyzed using descriptive and interpretive methods. These results suggest that trust, respect, and care explain the moral differences that exist between student voice and access to quality public schooling in the two schools.

What this research tells us:

Mirón found varying student perceptions about morality and public schooling—some students perceive morality as social justice; others view it as racial equality or academic equity.

At NHS, teachers view Asian-American and white students as academically stable and disciplined, but regard African Americans as academically weak and potentially dangerous. Because school policy prohibits school-wide assemblies and extra-curricular activities, students do not have a forum to air their views regarding school policies. As a result, students view learning as only classwork and perceive that unfairness in academic grade distribution contributes to lack of trust. Teachers tend to react defensively instead of listening and learning how to create more opportunity for students to succeed academically and socially.

At CHS, leadership promotes student voice through extracurricular activities, where students learn mutual respect and trust and develop their sense of African-American identity and racial pride. Because teachers help them intellectually, professionally, and personally, students perceive their education as challenging and their teachers as genuinely interested in their learning.

Racism structures social life in both schools. Teachers and administrators, who may lack knowledge of injustice, living conditions, needs, and career goals of students, are challenged by rapid social and technological changes and moral complexity in the midst of societal quest for social control, self-regulation, and effective educational governance. Students, who maintain social division between home and school life, tie the good life to quality education, racial solidarity, and student voice. With trust for their teachers, students can respect and hence empathize with other students and their families in caring relationships.

Recommendations for Educators in High Schools:

- ⇒ Provide a schooling climate that fosters the sharing of information and collaborative learning;
- ⇒ Focus on care for students, relevant curriculum, and quality education: students perceive graduation as the key to happiness and success;
- ⇒ Help students in the inner city manage their moral values by building their sense of efficacy;
- ⇒ Include student voices in the transformation of school structures, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and administration; and
- ⇒ Identify opportunity for educational dialogue that promotes moral-ethical leadership in schools.

Mirón, L. F., Biesta, G., & Bogotch, I. (2001). In pursuit of the good life: High school students' constructions of morality and the implications for educational leadership. *Cultural Studies—Critical Methodologies*, 1(4), 490-516.

We invite your response...

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