BOOK REVIEW
Moral Questions in the Classroom: How to Get Kids to Think Deeply About Real Life and Their Schoolwork by Katherine G. Simon. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2001. 288 pages.

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Test scores, standards, and high stakes testing seem to be discussed almost everywhere in education circles these days, but what do standards and moral education have to do with each other? Katherine Simon suggests of her recent publication that "[a]lthough this book focuses little on testing per se, I do aim to put a very different spin on what it means to raise standards and also to demonstrate some of the ways education is impoverished when it centers on testable content" (p. 9). Simon, director of research and professional development at the Coalition of Essential Schools in Oakland, California and a former English teacher with a doctorate from Stanford's School of Education, suggests that students be taught how to define life's purpose, how to ask informed moral questions and how to bring their own experiences to bear on their studies. They must be taught how to substantiate an argument and how to listen to another's opinion. A student's education could then be judged by the quality of the skills and habits learned from one's teachers.

Simon argues against standards rhetoric in her book, *Moral Questions in the Classroom: How to Get Kids to Think Deeply About Real Life and Their Schoolwork*, and encourages a major rethinking of American curriculum for what she calls moral questioning. She describes months spent observing in three public high schools, one Catholic high school, and one Jewish high school. Simon states that she sought "schools and classrooms where I would have a chance to see the ways moral and existential issues arise in the context of the core curriculum, in the care of talented teachers" (p. 40).

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Although only four examples of the effective use of moral questioning and discussion are presented in the book, these examples are discussed at great length. Simon reports the discussions verbatim and analyzes and critiques every word. For example, in an elective course called War and Peace at a public high school, the senior level students discussed the possibility of knowing the time of their own death. Such a discussion naturally leads to existential questions. Students in this class were also pushed to consider whether or not events such as the bombing of Hiroshima, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the My Lai massacre constituted war crimes. In science classes, students discussed whether or not science has made it possible to know things that people should not know, and issues were raised about human reproduction and childbirth. Simon repeatedly noted how interested and involved the learners were in these topics. Each of the teachers painstakingly allowed time for questions, encouraged dialogue through probing and pushing students to back statements with facts and not just opinions, yet each teacher avoided sermonizing or presenting one particular version of "Truth."

While these few positive examples are described in depth, Simon devotes 45 pages of her book to "missed opportunities for exploring moral questions." Simon declares that, "[f]or whatever combination of reasons, my months of observations yielded no sustained, engaged, whole-group discussions of moral issues in English classes" (p. 100). For example, in one classroom of 16 year olds, a female student, after hearing a lecture about the human reproductive system, asked the question "So there's only two to three days when a woman can get pregnant?" (p. 81). The teacher avoided answering this teen's critical question. In another classroom, a teacher spoke eloquently about the American Civil War and the African Americans who fought for the North and for freedom from slavery. After many facts were given a student questioned, "Was the South using slaves for war?" "No." "But the Black soldiers in the North weren't treated right—they didn't get shoes or anything." The teacher's reported response was, "Well, we could argue about that all day—but they were still better off fighting for their freedom in the North than being in slavery in the South" (p. 76). The students were then put to work in small groups without further discussion of the issue.

One final example takes place at the Jewish private school, where Simon assumed there would be more freedom to discuss these types of issues. The students read Elie Wiesel's *Night* about the Holocaust and experiences in a concentration camp. After some discussion, one student asked, "How can Wiesel still believe? How is it possible for anyone to believe in God after the Holocaust?" The teacher recognized that this was an important question, but dismissed the youth's query with, "You really should bring it up with the rabbi in your religion class" (p. 87).

Simon received the 2002 Educator's Award from the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International for *Moral Questions in the Classroom*. The Book Forum Committee of the American Educational Research Association also recognized this book as one of four outstanding books in curriculum for 2001-2002, and the book was a finalist for the 2001-2002 National Jewish Book Award. All of these awards serve to affirm the validity of the author's challenge to educators and her meaningful style of writing. It is interesting to note, however, that the awards were given to recognize excellence in the area of curriculum. While Simon's emphasis on class discussion, collaboration among colleagues, and motivation of students toward the curriculum is certainly worthy of recognition, she neglects important elements of character development. Simon suggests methods to interest students in the curriculum, ways to accomplish an interdisciplinary approach to teaching, and ways to encourage every pupil to participate in lively class discussions, but she does not address going beyond an intellectual or motivational affirmation of moral issues. There is no attention given to changing one's behavior, or to making humane decisions, or

even to demonstrating care for fellow human beings. Simon credits Nel Noddings' concept of "pedagogical neutrality" in class dialogue as foundational to this work, but Simon fails to adhere to Noddings' thesis for moral education in the realm of "caring for one another".

Most character educators identify moral action as a significant component of character development (Lickona, 1991; Ryan and Bohlin, 1999; Noddings, 2002). Other than concern for what one might call "discussion etiquette," Simon neglects the importance of affecting one's behavior as a part of moral education. She addresses the need for the modeling of sound moral behavior by the teacher and the school community, but only from the perspective that a lack of good behavior would be noticed by students and thought to be hypocritical. Simon does not address how moral questioning will affect student behavior, nor does she emphasize the need for opportunities to engage in moral action. When observing in classrooms, Simon said that she would be attending to "[q]ueries connected to how human beings should act—including discussions of the past, present, and future effects of individual and societal actions on the well-being of other human beings, other living things, and the earth" (p. 37). While there are plenty of discussions of the past in the book, present and future actions seem to be forgotten.

Overall, *Moral Questions in the Classroom: How to Get Kids to Think Deeply About Real Life and Their Schoolwork* by Katherine G. Simon is an insightful and practical book. Simon's discussion of classroom observations is likely to inspire and encourage teachers to be more attentive to the moral questions facing their students. Readers will find strong pedagogical strategies for discussion and dialogue, as well as methods for discussing controversial questions in a fair and complete manner. Simon attends to the cognitive and affective components of character education very well. This book is one that teachers should read to learn more about engaging students in the discussion of moral questions. One must look elsewhere however for classroom examples of the moral action component critical to comprehensive character education.

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