

“the paradise” of possibilities in a small school, in small classrooms where teachers, parents, communities, and students mutually thrive.

To those who would teach in our urban high schools—teach to transform the students, not just cover the curriculum—I say, “Your job, should you decide to accept it, is to touch the spirit and the humanness of each urban teenager and channel that spirit to engage in positive ways with learning and academic excellence.”

The journey through the co-construction of learning and discipline practices is not for the faint of heart. Often the harsh realities of the students’ lives will intrude, or something said or done with the best intentions will cause offense. If we truly want to teach those the current public system has not served, we must not ignore places of discomfort.

Discipline is a prerequisite to success, but discipline cannot consist of behavioral constraints oppressively imposed. Discipline must be an individual choice to do the right thing for the sake of the whole and for the sake of developing the individual learner as a critical thinker. If educators achieve the trust of their students—trust that can be accomplished by engaging them in a professional learning community—constructive discipline will result. But if they impose the kind of discipline found in schools as we know them today, the result will be schools as we know them today, only smaller.

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## **Creating Moral Schools: The Enabling Potential of Critical Friends Groups**

*by Bruce Law*

**C**an a school—the institution, rather than the people who compose the institution—be moral? I believe the answer is yes, and further, that educators are in a position to create moral schools. In fact, I believe that the fundamental challenge for school leaders today lies not in declining budgets, higher standards, and uncertain graduation outcomes but in creating a moral purpose for their schools. In this essay, I hope to illustrate how Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) can serve as vehicles for moral leaders to create moral schools.

Ordinarily, we apply the concept of morality to individuals. We say that individuals are moral to the extent they choose a course of action

that aligns with their principles and values, which themselves can be judged for moral content. Principles and values are considered a given, and actions chosen can be better or worse. Therefore, in application, morality can be reduced to the intentionality to act.

An institution can be judged by whether it acts justly or unjustly, but declaring an institution moral would require that we find the element of intentionality embedded in the institution. Attributing elements of human values and behavior to an institution is an intellectual challenge that demands supporting discussion; however, if schools really can be made moral, we owe it to ourselves and our students to learn what a moral school would look like. Then we can guide our own schools to become moral institutions.

In *The Construction of Social Reality* (Free Press, 1995), John Searle presents the construct “collective intentionality,” which he regards as the fundamental construct that actually defines an institution. Collective intentionality differs from an aggregate of individual intentionality and from coordinated activity. For example, teachers who work in isolation from one another in a building may coordinate their activities: e.g., science classrooms eat the second lunch, or the fourth-grade teacher has a preparation period when the students go to music. Each teacher may act with moral intentions; nonetheless, the school will not possess the collective intentionality necessary for institutional morality to exist.

Instead, collective intentionality represents a collective end to which each teacher contributes individual decisions. However, because our moral reasoning derives from our deepest-held convictions, my convictions are not likely to be identical to yours. It is unlikely that our individual conceptions of the good can be molded into a collectively held good; to make schools moral, we need a collective end other than deeply held individual convictions.

In *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971) John Rawls acknowledges that individual religious, philosophical, and moral beliefs produce reasonable disagreements; we therefore could never directly base collective agreement upon those beliefs, however reasonable. To avoid direct confrontations among inconsistent doctrines, Rawls proposes that we consider the kinds of agreements we might make were we not dependent on our individual conceptions of the good: agreements that, while respecting those conceptions, would achieve what he calls “overlapping consensus.”

To apply Rawls’s framework to the challenge of creating a moral school: imagine that the color of your skin, your social position, and your individual talents were of unknown value to you. Working under that assumption, those of you who are white would not rely on the white privilege that in fact favors you, and those of you who are persons of

color would not be constrained by white privilege. Additionally, you would not assume that any material advantage your parents enjoy would translate into social or economic advantage for you, nor would you assume that good grades in math and English are preferable to developing talents in the fine arts or music.

If race, socioeconomic standing, and specific talents did not influence us, what kinds of choices would we make for ourselves and our children? I find it likely that as members of a liberal Western democracy, we would insist on the liberty of all to pursue individual conceptions of the good as our guiding principle. Of course, we would realize the



inevitability of inequalities resulting from differences in individual abilities; yet because we would not know how our race, socioeconomic status, or individual talents positioned us socially or economically, we would have no vested interest in any status quo, and we would likely adopt a working premise that any disadvantage be natural and not socially constructed. Thus the principle of liberty to pursue individual conceptions of the good would manifest itself in a fundamental working premise, equality of opportunity.

By postulating certain assumptions that are not true, but that participants agree would be true if the world were a better place, Rawls's framework allows parents and educators from different, often-incompatible backgrounds to reach consensus on what a moral school would entail. Extrapolating on my own application of Rawls's framework, I suggest that adopting the principle of freedom and the working premise of equality of opportunity would create schools that focus more attention on those who need it. Such a principle would ensure the equality of opportunity necessary to pursue individual conceptions of the good. Because the intentionality—the principles and working premises—upon which such schools would be based represent an overlapping consensus, the schools would be moral schools.

Critical Friends Groups are vehicles for creating collective intentionality that reaches a shared end: increased opportunity for the disadvantaged to create equality of opportunity. CFGs, in other words, are vehicles for creating moral schools. Not that participating in CFGs is the only action educators can take to create moral schools; rather, moral schools would reflect the beliefs, ends, and practices that are the underpinnings of CFGs. Nor would CFGs work only for poor students or those of color. Any student whose learning is a concern can become the focus of a group of teachers who want to help that child. A struggling student with socioeconomic advantages, as well as one whose social background is a disadvantage, can be the beneficiary of CFGs. Each is a legitimate focus when the working premise is to achieve equality of opportunity for all.

Charles Glenn, a noted advocate of school reform, has noted that the reform process requires "hard thinking, thinking which is not afraid to grapple with the complicated and delicate questions." In line with that theme, I have suggested here that what matters specifically are what the complicated and delicate questions are, how we think about them, and how we interact to grapple with them. The decisions we make to create our schools, and the decisions we make in response to those questions can be judged according to moral criteria.

A school is moral when its collective intentions, practices, and thinking provide all students the means to pursue their individual conceptions of the good. When educators aim collectively to bring advantage to

the least advantaged, Critical Friends Groups become a rational means to attaining a shared end. Schools with CFGs are not, of course, inescapably moral, any more than, as noted earlier, individual teacher choices would by themselves make a school moral.

It is the responsibility of educational leadership to establish collective intentionality: to ask how the stakeholders in a school community regard the least-advantaged students and to ask what practices have grown up around their beliefs. Such questions do not just appear; they come from a moral leader's personal intentionality, and far too many school leaders have been less than explicit about the agreements upon which their schools have been built. Many schools' intentionality, practices, and beliefs have, instead, evolved willy-nilly: collectively, they are merely "the way we do things around here."

School leaders become moral leaders when their own moral frameworks interact with those of teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders to create institutions that both shape and reflect individual thinking and practices. It is not conceptually difficult to ask teachers and parents the question of moral purpose in a school, but finding an effective vehicle for managing the process and constructively using their answers is a daunting challenge.

Critical Friends Groups can provide such a vehicle. They can do more than benefit the participants and their students from week to week and year to year. Properly employed, CFGs can be used to create truly moral schools.

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