

# Should Morals and Values Be Taught in Public Schools?

Should a teacher instruct students about values and matters of right and wrong? You may feel that this question demands an obvious affirmative answer. A problem arises, however, when you are asked to clarify the specific values that should be taught. How do you, as a teacher in a multicultural school setting, determine what moral values should be the focus of instruction?

One school of thought, influenced largely by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, endorses direct instruction in moral development. The educational theorists who endorse this position contend that there exists a body of morals that spans all cultures. This body of morals can be articulated at any point in time and should be taught directly to students in public schools. People—especially parents—may also feel that children are faced with an increasingly complex and dangerous society and cannot be expected simply to absorb the proper morals and values from the world around them. Because of this, the schools should step in.

In contrast to this point of view, those influenced by the educational theories proposed by Syd Simon in his text *Values Clarification* reject the direct instruction

of morals on the grounds that democracy demands that its citizens be free to clarify their own sets of values. This school of thought calls for public schools to refrain from the direct instruction of morals and asks teachers to help students define their own sets of individually selected values. The approach requires teachers to remain neutral in their presentations of opposing value systems. The teacher's role is simply to assist students in the clarification of the consequences of selecting any one set of morals or values.

This difficult problem of teaching morals and values is especially problematic for a democracy.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Who shall select the set of values to be taught?
2. If the majority is given this right, then what becomes of the individual rights of minorities?
3. Yet is it possible to teach a value-free curriculum?
4. Does the very act of instruction imply a certain value system expressed and upheld by the individual teacher?

To answer these questions on-line and e-mail your answers to your professor, go to Chapter 9 of the companion website ([www.ablongman.com/johnson14e](http://www.ablongman.com/johnson14e)) and click on Professional Dilemma.